

A PENGUIN SPECIAL



CRAIG JOHNSON

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of *THE COLD DISH* and *AS THE CROW FLIES*

CHRISTMAS IN ABSAROKA COUNTY

WALT LONGMIRE CHRISTMAS STORIES



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The First Novel in the Walt Longmire Mystery Series

PENGUIN BOOKS

CHRISTMAS IN ABSAROKA COUNTY

Walt Longmire Christmas Stories

CRAIG JOHNSON is the author of eight novels in the Walt Longmire mystery series, which has garnered popular and critical acclaim. *The Cold Dish* was a Dilys Award finalist and the French edition won Le Prix du Polar Nouvel Observateur/BibliObs. *Death Without Company*, the Wyoming State Historical Association's Book of the Year, won France's Le Prix 813. *Another Man's Moccasins* was the Western Writers of America's Spur Award winner and the Mountains & Plains Independent Booksellers' Association Book of the Year, and *The Dark Horse*, the fifth in the series, was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year. *Junkyard Dogs* won the Watson Award for a mystery novel with the best sidekick, and *Hell Is Empty* was a *New York Times* best seller and was named *Library Journal's* Best Mystery of the Year. All are available from Penguin. The eighth novel in the series, *As the Crow Flies*, was a *New York Times* best seller as well and an Indie Next List pick and will be available in paperback in May 2013. Craig Johnson's Walt Longmire novels have now been adapted for television in the hit series *Longmire* on A&E. His next novel, *A Serpent's Tooth*, will be available from Viking in May 2013. Johnson lives in Ucross, Wyoming, population twenty-five.

Praise for Craig Johnson and the Walt Longmire Mystery Series

“Like the greatest crime novelists, Johnson is a student of human nature. Walt Longmire is strong but fallible, a man whose devil-may-care stoicism masks a heightened sensitivity to the horrors he’s witnessed. Unlike traditional genre novelists who obsess mainly over every hairpin plot turn, Johnson’s books are also preoccupied with the mystery of his characters’ psyches.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“Johnson knows the territory, both fictive and geographical, and tells us about it in prose that crackles.” —Robert B. Parker

“The characters talk straight from the hip and the Wyoming landscape is its own kind of eloquence.” —*The New York Times*

“[Walt Longmire] is an easy man to like. . . . Johnson evokes the rugged landscape with reverential prose, lending a heady atmosphere to his story.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Stepping into Walt’s world is like slipping on a favorite pair of slippers, and it’s where those slippers lead that provides a thrill. Johnson pens a series that should become a ‘must’ read, so curl up, get comfortable, and enjoy the ride.” —*The Denver Post*

“A winning piece of work . . . There’s a convincing feel to the whole package: a sense that you’re viewing this territory through the eyes of someone who knows it as adoring lover and skeptical onlooker at the same time.” —*The Washington Post*

“Johnson’s pacing is tight and his dialogue snaps.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

“Truly great. Reading Craig Johnson is a treat. . . . [He] tells great stories, casts wonderful characters and writes in a style that compels the reader forward.” —*Wyoming Tribune Eagle*

Also by CRAIG JOHNSON

The Cold Dish

Death Without Company

Kindness Goes Unpunished

Another Man's Moccasins

The Dark Horse

Hell Is Empty

As the Crow Flies

FORTHCOMING FROM VIKING

A Serpent's Tooth

CRAIG JOHNSON

**CHRISTMAS IN ABSAROKA
COUNTY**

WALT LONGMIRE CHRISTMAS STORIES

A PENGUIN SPECIAL



PENGUIN BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

It's holiday season in Absaroka County and Sheriff Walt Longmire gets personal in this delightful collection of four short stories from *New York Times*–bestselling author Craig Johnson.

Readers glimpse a softer side of Sheriff Walt Longmire as he grapples with the death of his wife, Martha, and his sometimes turbulent but ever-loving relationship with his daughter, Cady. In these four stories —“Ministerial Aid,” “Slick-Tongued Devil,” “Toys for Tots,” and “Unbalanced” (three of which have been sent to Johnson’s fans over the years in the author’s “Post-it” e-mails)—Walt is alternately at his best and his worst. He helps a somewhat delusional elderly victim of domestic abuse while sporting a bathrobe and a mean hangover on New Year’s Day. He’s sidelined by grief when his wife’s obituary reappears in the paper and there’s an unexpected knock on his door two days before Christmas. He strives to help even those who don’t want it when he picks up a young female hitchhiker, and he’s forced into some last-minute Christmas shopping by the Greatest Legal Mind of Our Time, during which he might just end up saving a young Navy chaplain’s Christmas.

Full of Longmire’s dry wit and good heart, *Christmas in Absaroka County* is a holiday must-have for every Longmire and Craig Johnson fan.

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To JUDY

MINISTERIAL AID

The Millennium: January 1, 2000—6:20 A.M.

Driving south on I-25, I kept sneaking glances through my half-closed eyes in hopes of seeing those first, dull, yellow rays of sunup crawling from the horizon.

My county in northern Wyoming is approximately seven thousand square miles, about the size of Vermont or New Hampshire. It's a long way from one end to the other, especially in times of crisis, so in my line of work it pays to have a substation. Powder Junction, in the southern part of Absaroka County, is where I subject at least one of the deputies on my staff to some of the most bucolic duty they'll likely ever withstand in a lifetime of law enforcement.

It's the second largest town to Durant, the county seat. Straddling the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains and the Powder River country, the little settlement of five hundred brave souls is forty-five minutes of straight-as-an-arrow driving. I don't make it down here very often—I don't make it much of anywhere very often since my wife, Martha, died a few months ago. The reason I was here, very hungover and very early on New Year's Day, was because I owed Turk Connally, the lone member of my Powder Junction staff, a paycheck. I hadn't gotten it to him on Friday, which was payday, because it was New Year's Eve. The reason I was driving the hundred miles round-trip to deliver Turk's check in the first place was that I had gotten into an altercation with the county commissioners over the price of stamps. Since they pay for my gas, I was teaching them a lesson.

As I drove along with a headache so severe that I could hardly stand to open my eyes, I began wondering to whom it was I was teaching a lesson.

Turk generally slept late anyway but especially the morning after a holiday, so I knew he wouldn't be at the office. I simply unlocked the door of the old Quonset hut that served as our headquarters south and left his check on the desk.

I was just leaving when the rotary-dial phone rang. I knew that after three rings it would transfer the call to the rented house where he lived, but I decided in the spirit of the season that I'd cut the kid a break and answer it. "Absaroka County Sheriff's Department."

The voice was female and uncertain. "Turk?"

"Nope, it's Walt."

There was a pause. "Who?"

"Walt Longmire, the sheriff."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Walt. I must've dialed the Durant number. . . ."

"No, I'm here in PJ. How can I help you?"

She adjusted the phone, and I could hear another voice in the background as she fumbled with it. "It's Elaine Whelks, the Methodist preacher down here, and I'm over at the Sinclair station by the highway." There was another pause. "Walt, I think we've got a situation."

* * *

With my head pounding like traffic, if there had been any, I drove the short distance through town and under the overpass past the entrance to the rest stop, and turned into the service station. I noticed a late-model Buick parked at the outskirts of the lot over near the sign that advertised gas prices to passing motorists (\$1.54 a gallon—that would definitely teach those commissioners). It was still mostly dark as I parked between a tan Oldsmobile and a Jeep Cherokee, climbed out of my four-year-old Bronco, which was adorned with stars and light bars, and trudged inside.

There were two women holding steaming Styrofoam cups of coffee who were seated on some old café chairs to the left of the register. They both looked up at me as I stood by their table.

"Happy New Year."

They said nothing.

"I'm Walt Longmire."

They still stared at me, but maybe it was my bathrobe.

"The sheriff." I glanced down at the old, off-white, pilled garment, a gift from my now-dead wife. "I wasn't planning on making any public appearances today."

The older woman in the purple down-filled coat extended her hand. "Elaine Whelks, Sheriff. I'm the one that called." She looked at the bathrobe again and then quickly added, "I knew Martha through the church, and I'm so sorry about your loss; she was a wonderful woman."

I squeezed the bridge of my nose with a thumb and forefinger and gave the automatic response I'd honed over the last couple of months. "Thank you."

The younger woman, heavysset and wearing a Deke Latham Memorial Rodeo sweatshirt, rose and smiled at me, a little sadly. "Would you like a cup of coffee, Sheriff?"

I nodded my head and sat on one of the chairs. "Sure."

The older woman studied me, and she looked sad, too; maybe it was just me, but everybody looked sad these days. She dipped her head to

look me in the eyes. "I'm the Methodist minister over at St. Timothy's."

I nodded. "You said."

"How are you doing, Walt?"

The throbbing in my head immediately got worse. "Hunky-dory."

Her eyes stayed on me. "I don't think I've ever seen your hair this long."

I pushed it back from my face, and it felt like even the follicles ached. "I've been meaning to get it cut, but I've been kind of busy."

"How's Cady?"

I laughed but immediately regretted it.

"Something funny, Walt?"

Cady was my daughter who was in law school in Washington and had been in Crossroads to keep me company over the holidays. I shrugged, thinking that maybe if I could get this over with quick I could go home and go back to sleep, sleeping being a part-time occupation lately. "We had a fight last night."

"You and Cady?"

I nodded. "She got mad; went back to Seattle." Breaking off the conversation, I looked out the window. "Maybe you'd better tell me what it is you need my assistance with."

The preacher sighed and then gestured toward the woman who was bringing me a cup of coffee. "She called me this morning and said that Travis, the young man who works nights, left her a note that a woman was parked at the end of the lot."

Liz set the large cup in front of me along with a bowl of creamers and some sugar packets; I didn't know her so she didn't know my habits. "Black is fine. Thanks." I took a sip—it was hot and good.

"We generally don't pay very much attention to these types of things. People get tired and pull off the interstate; maybe they feel more comfortable over here than at the rest stop with someone around—a woman especially."

I pulled my hair back again—I was going to have to ask Henry for a leather strap if I didn't get a haircut pretty soon—and sipped the coffee, dribbling a little on the table. "Uh-huh."

"But she was still here this morning when I opened up."

I set my cup back down. "I see."

Liz glanced over my shoulder toward the parking lot. "She came over about twenty minutes ago and filled her tank—used the credit card machine and then pulled back there again."

I glanced behind me, eyeing the vehicle. "She ran it all night?"

Elaine nodded her head. "That's the only way you'd be able to stay out there, as cold as it is."

"Local or out-of-state plates?" They both looked at me blankly as I

turned my cup in the small amount of coffee I'd spilled. "Did you talk to her?"

"I did." Liz pointed at the minister. "And then I called her."

Looking back at Elaine, and then over to Liz, I thought about how in some instances my staff and I also contact the local clergy to provide assistance to needy travelers. "She needed ministerial aid?"

The two women looked at each other, then the pastor turned back to me. "She says she's waiting on the Messiah."

I took a long time in responding but then laughed. "Aren't we all?"

Elaine leaned in close but then retreated a little, probably from the smell. I haven't been bathing regularly, being so busy. "I'm serious, Sheriff. She says she's supposed to meet Him. Here. Today."

I wasn't sure if I'd heard her right. "Jesus?"

"Yes."

"Jesus." I sighed, glancing around trying not to cast aspersions, but it was hard. "Returning after two thousand years and he chooses the Sinclair station in Powder Junction, Wyoming?"

"Apparently."

I ran my hand through my beard. "Well, I guess I'd better go talk to her."

As I stood, Elaine held out a roll of breath mints. "Maybe you should have a few of these?"

Liz touched the stained sleeve of my bathrobe but only briefly. "And you should probably know—she has a knife."

* * *

There are twenty-four counties in Wyoming. Ours, being the least populated, gets designated number twenty-four—the number in front of Steamboat the bucking horse on the longest-running license plate in the world—so the Buick was not only from in-state but also from in-county. Stumbling across the snow-covered parking lot in my moccasins, I approached the idling Buick from the rear of the driver's side.

The woman was elderly, probably approaching eighty years of age, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and an oversize parka with fake fur around the collar.

Standing there in the melted snow, I tapped on the window.

It startled her, and I could clearly see the butcher knife clutched in her hands as she turned to look at me. Her face was wet from tears, one of her eyes was swollen shut, and I was betting she had a full-blown headache as well. She stared at me the same way the ladies in the convenience store had.

I watched my breath cloud the window between us as the wind lifted

the bathrobe. "Hey, could I speak with you for a moment?"

She sat there with her mouth a little open and then began fumbling at finding the window button, but when she did, it only whined a little and then pulled at the rubber weather seal at the top—frozen shut.

I gestured over the top of her car and toward the passenger-side door. "How 'bout I come around and get in?"

She nodded, and I ambled my way around the four-door and pulled on the handle—it too, frozen shut. Unwilling to take no for an answer, I put all six feet five inches and two hundred and fifty pounds behind the effort and almost took the door off. I quickly climbed in and slammed it shut behind me.

It seemed warmer in the car, but not by much. The radio was on some AM station and a guy was screaming about it being the Millennium, and therefore the end of the world, about salvation and a bunch of other stuff. I didn't think my head could hurt any more than it already did, but the radio was so loud that the headache escalated. I reached up, turned the thing off, and looked at her. "Sorry, I can't take that crap."

She stared at me with her mouth still hanging open.

I was ready to rest my head on the dash but figured I'd better see what was what first. I stamped the snow off my moccasins onto the rubber floor mats. "Lot of snow."

She nodded.

I gestured toward the weapon in her hands. "Mind if I have the knife?"

Without hesitation, she handed it to me, and I placed it on the floor by my feet. I turned back to look at her, but she was the first to speak. "You . . . You're bigger than I thought you'd be."

It seemed like an odd thing to say, especially since I was pretty sure I didn't know her. "I get that a lot." She seemed to want more, so I added. "From my father's side."

She nodded, studying me. "I understand."

I straightened the collar of my robe. "I apologize for the way I'm dressed, but I really wasn't planning on going out today."

"That's okay."

She looked like she might begin crying again, and I felt a little empathetic twinge. "I've had some problems of my own as of late. . . ."

She nodded enthusiastically, wiping the tears away with the back of a hand aged with spots and wrinkled skin, careful to avoid the wounded eye. "Me, too."

I held my fingers out to the heater vents, stretching them as a matter of course, buying time till my head stopped hurting enough so that I could concentrate. "I guess that's what this life is all about, getting from one trouble to the next, at least in my job."

She turned in the seat. "I would imagine; and you get everybody's

problems.”

“Pretty busy, especially during the holidays.”

“Yes.” Her eyes shone. “Everybody thought I was crazy, but I said you’d come.”

I looked around, yawning and stretching my jaw muscles, the popping in my head sounding like gunshots. “Well, when we get a call . . .” I sat there for a moment longer, looking at her, and then reached a hand out and touched her cheek. “Tell me about this problem.”

She ducked her head away but then reached up and took my hand, holding it in her lap like she had held the knife. She didn’t say anything, and we just sat there in the Buick, listening to the running motor and the fan of the heater. “He doesn’t mean to do it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I forget things.” She sobbed a little. “I just don’t remember like I used to.” She stared at the dash, the instruments glowing a soft green.

* * *

It was a modest little home on the outskirts of town, a single-level ranch, the kind that can contain a lot of rage. There was a yellowed plastic illuminated Santa in the yard, and I was surprised that when we met at the front of the car, she looked at it and then at me. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Wondering what she was talking about, I glanced at the jolly old elf; I decided not to judge. “Um, no. I’m a big fan myself.”

Her spirits buoyed. “Oh, good.”

Oddly, she took my hand again, and we walked up the shoveled walk to the front porch, a gold cast emanating from a needless bug bulb. As we stood there, she threaded her fingers into her parka and produced a prodigious key ring.

Suddenly, the door was yanked open, and a bald man with a Little League baseball bat in one hand was yelling at the two of us through the storm door; another wave of pain ricocheted around in my head.

“Where the hell have you been? Do you know there’s no damn cigarettes in this house?” Peering through heavily framed glasses, he glanced up at me. “And who the hell is this?”

Her head, having dropped in embarrassment, rose as she clutched my arm. “This, Ernie, is our Lord and Savior.”

I stopped pinching my nose in an attempt to relieve the pain and turned to look down at her. She smiled a hopeful smile, and then we both turned to look at him.

He stood there for a moment looking first at her, then at me, and then back to her before leaning the baseball bat against the doorjamb. “Jesus

H. Christ.”

She smiled and nodded. “That’s right.”

Through the pain in my head, I smiled—it seemed like the thing to do.

He pushed open the storm door, reached out, grabbed her hand, and half yanked her into the house. “God damnit, get in here before you wander out into traffic.”

He tried to close the door, but I caught it and held it open. He struggled, but I figure I had him by a hundred and fifty pounds. His eyes had a panicked look. “You’re not coming in here.”

I took the aluminum frame in my other hand and pulled him through onto the porch. “Nope, you’re coming out here.” I looked in at the elderly woman and smiled reassuringly, holding up a finger. “We’ll be just a minute.”

She nodded and gave me a little wave.

When I turned to the old man, he had shuttled toward the corner of the porch like a sand crab, under the light on the porch. He looked uncertain and then spoke in a low voice. “Look, if you’re a hobo and need some change . . .”

I shook my head.

He studied my bathrobe, even going so far as to check my wrists for a medical bracelet. “If you’re from some loony bin . . .”

I took my hand down and leaned on the other side of the door. “Do you know who I am?”

He clutched his arms in an attempt to ward off the cold. “Well, I know you’re not Jesus Christ.”

“I’m Walt Longmire, the sheriff of this county.”

He adjusted his glasses and leaned in, peering through my beard and hair, finally leaning back and nodding his head. “So you are.” On more solid ground, he smirked. “I hear tell you’re a drunk.”

I looked out in the yard toward the east where the sun was still struggling to shoot a beam over the frozen ground of the Powder River country. “Is that what they say?”

His teeth were starting to chatter now. “Yeah, it is.”

I stretched my jaw in a wide yawn again and tried to feel the cold, but it just wasn’t there; in all honesty, I just wanted to feel something, anything. Maybe that’s why after Cady left last night I’d drunk to excess. “Well, they might be right.” I straightened my robe. “My wife died a couple of months ago.” I threaded my fingers through my beard and felt things in there. “It wasn’t a perfect marriage by any means; we fought, about stupid things—when our daughter should go to bed, the color of the mailbox, money. . . . But she was the best thing that ever happened to me.” I took a deep breath and exhaled, watching the twin clouds of vapor roll across my chest like a cartoon bull. “Maybe the best thing that ever

will.”

He glanced at the closed door and then at the house slippers on his feet.

I flicked my eyes at the door, too. “She seems nice.”

He nodded. “Esther, her name is Esther.” He automatically stuck out his hand. “Ernie. My name is Ernie Decker.”

I shook his hand and noticed the swelling and bruises. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Decker.”

He quickly tucked the hand back under his arm. “We’ve hit a rough patch these past few months.”

“Well, at least you’ve got her to have a rough patch with.”

We stood there for a while longer, then I pushed off the doorjamb and started toward the steps; I stopped on the second to turn and look at him, my head dropped, hair covering my face, and I was pretty sure that even from this distance, my voice was vibrating his lungs: “You hit her again and I’ll be back, and this time it won’t take me two thousand years.”

I walked down the shoveled walk and driveway, took a left on Main, and struck off back the couple of miles toward the highway and the Sinclair station. After a moment, a tan Oldsmobile pulled up beside me, and I heard a window whir down.

“Walter?” I stopped and turned to see the Methodist preacher leaning across the seat to look up at me. “I thought I’d follow you and see if you needed a ride back to your truck.”

“Thanks.” I continued to watch for the sunrise as I tightened the sash on my robe. “But I think I’ll just walk.”

She paused for a second. “Are you all right?”

“Yep.”

“How is the woman in the car?”

I chewed on the skin at the inside of my lip, still watching the skyline, flat as a burned, black pancake. “I think she’ll be okay.”

“She seemed awfully confused.”

Just then, I thought I might’ve caught that first ray that shoots over the edge of the earth something akin to a hopeful but misguided thought, and it felt as if maybe, just maybe, I might’ve felt something. “Oh, like the rest of us. . . .” I sighed. “She’s just waiting on something.”

SLICK-TONGUED DEVIL

You steel yourself against those unexpected surprise visits in your mind, but it does nothing to prepare you for the physical evidence of a life shared, a life lost; her voice on the backlogged messages of the answering machine, photographs used as bookmarks, a song she used to hum, people who knew her but didn't really, asking about her in casual conversation. Others telling you they know what it's like when they don't. If you're lucky, you convince yourself that the only real world is the one in your head, and you make a fragile and separate truce that lasts until one of those depth charges erupts and you can no longer run silent or run deep.

It happened on a Tuesday morning at the Busy Bee Café two days before Christmas as I waited for "the usual." I'd reached across the counter to snag the newly delivered *Durant Courant* and had flipped open the first page—and seen my wife's obituary.

I don't know how long I was frozen like that, but when Dorothy, the chief cook and bottle washer of the establishment, refilled my coffee cup she'd spotted the grainy black-and-white photograph. I suppose it was her voice, behind me and to the right, that had brought me back. "Oh, Lord."

I went home early from work that day, and nobody asked why.

I parked the Bullet behind the house because I thought it would be easier to unload the cord of firewood that I'd stored in it through the back door. I draped my uniform shirt and gun belt on the back of my chair and took another shower, put on a flannel shirt, a pair of jeans, and my old moccasins. I opened a can of soup but left it on the counter; then I sat in my chair and drank eleven Rainier beers.

When I looked up, it was sleeting and dark.

* * *

I thought back to the exact afternoon it had actually happened—one of those warm November days we sometimes get on the high plains, a friendly chinook from British Columbia that stays the freeze that solidifies your marrow.

She wanted to sit outside on an aged wooden chair I'd bought at the Salvation Army, the red paint peeling away and revealing the gray, weathered wood underneath. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

Her eyes were closed, but she opened them, the pale blue matching

the Wyoming sky that we could see through the windows of our tiny cabin. "Fresh air is good for you."

I put on the kettle to make tea for her, wrapped her up in a thick Cheyenne blanket that our friend, Henry Standing Bear, had given her when she had gotten sick, and carried her outside where she could see the naked trees in the draws of both Piney and Clear Creeks, the branches moving only slightly as if the cottonwoods were stamping their roots to stay warm. "Could you get my Bible?"

I went back in and retrieved her Book from the nightstand downstairs where we'd moved the bed. I carefully placed it, opened to the marked page, in her lap. "Here, the feel-good book of the holidays."

I watched as her narrow finger fit between the creased pages and the solemn words. She smiled. "You should be more tolerant of things that give people comfort."

I watched a great horned owl drift above one of the creek banks and hitched a thumb into my belt. "Hmm."

"Tough guy." Her fingers climbed up my pant leg and caught my hand there. "You know, a little forgiveness in your character wouldn't hurt."

I glanced down at her. "Not my line of work."

She nodded her head at my stubbornness. Except for the mild buffeting of the wind and the chirp of prairie finches, it was silent. "You know, I always thought you'd soften a little with age."

I crouched by her chair, pulled the fine blanket up closer around her shoulders, and ran my hand across her back, the spread of my fingers as large as the trunk of her body. "Hang around. I might surprise you."

She took a slight breath. "I'm trying."

I went back inside at the call of the kettle and returned with two mugs, the paper flags flapping on the ends of the submerged teabags. It had been a dry fall, and there wasn't much snow to make it a typical Thanksgiving, but the high desert was warm that afternoon. "It's nice, isn't it?"

She didn't answer.

* * *

Dog watched as I got up from the La-Z-Boy and tossed the blanket over my uniform and the gun belt hanging there. I walked across the plywood subfloor to the window facing northwest where something was making noise. Being awakened ruins some of the best dreams. The wind was picking up, and the heavens had gone nickel-plated underneath the darkness.

There were the skeletal poles of a half-erected Cheyenne-style lodge that Henry had built in preparation of a New Year's sweat. It had not

been covered, and it hunkered out there in the frozen grass with some of the loose willow branches splayed toward the winter sky like a naked fan.

A few granules of snowy sleet swept across the ridges along the Bighorn Mountains and collected in the low spots and lee sides of the European blue sage, and on one of the escaped structural limbs of the sweat lodge, a great horned owl sat with his back to me. The Cheyenne believe that owls are messengers of the dead and that they bring word from worlds beyond. My thoughts meandered back to the sunny afternoon when my wife had passed, and to the days since when the owls had come to impart providence.

I raised an almost-empty Rainier to the window and tapped the aluminum punt against the glass; the large head swiveled and the great golden eyes looked back at me. The owl watched as I spoke words not of my own mouth with a breath that clouded the glass.

Dog barked from his spot alongside the sofa and moved over to the unpainted half-panel glass door. The alcohol was having an effect, like those electronic governors that keep modern cars from going over a hundred and fifty-five miles an hour. I belched, hung an elbow on the sill, and looked at Dog. When I glanced back toward the partially assembled sweat lodge, the owl was gone.

Dog barked again. I thought I'd heard a knock but, considering the weather, was sure it couldn't be a visitor and that something must've blown against the side of the cabin.

I pushed off the sill and walked past the sofa to the door, placed a hand against the glass, and peered across my porch to the two mud troughs that led across the irrigation ditch to the county road. There was a car parked in the drive close to the house, a taupe-colored Cadillac with Nevada plates. He stood to the side of the porch, his back to the wind. Long silver hair blew with the gusts that traveled across the porch and plastered a city-type overcoat against him. He was tall and thin and held some sort of package against his chest.

The man raised his hand to knock again, but when he saw me, he started and froze. I scooted Dog away with my boot and opened the door about ten inches. "Can I help you?"

The man leaned in close to the log wall and looked at me as he adjusted a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his long nose. "Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Longmire?" He hunched a shoulder against the wind and ducked his head. "I was wondering if it would be possible for me to speak to Mrs. Longmire?"

In my beer-fogged brain I thought of something Dorothy had said, that these things always happened in threes: the newspaper, the owl, and now this. "I beg your pardon?"

He clutched whatever it was against his chest and pressed himself

closer to the doorjamb. "I was wondering if Mrs. Longmire was available."

I stared at him for only a moment more and then opened the door enough for him to squeeze through. He stood there dripping onto the dirty plywood and then sidestepped, trying to escape Dog's nose in his crotch. Our faces were about eight inches apart—his was thin like the rest of him and, even though he'd been on the stoop for only a short time, his hair was molded to his skull. Underneath the khaki trench coat were an expensive dark suit, a rain-transparent white dress shirt, and a maroon tie the width of a tire tread. One of his hands was clutched around the package, which was in a Tyvek bag.

He pushed Dog's nose away. "Not a fit night for man or beast." He grinned for a moment, and then his features shifted to an earnest appeal. "I'm really sorry to be bothering you on a night like this, but is Mrs. Longmire in?"

I stuffed a hand in my jeans and downed the remainder of my beer. He was handsome in a talking-head, newscaster-gone-to-seed sort of way. "What's this about?"

He stood almost at attention, gesturing with the plastic-wrapped package. "Mr. Longmire, my name is Gene Sherman, and I'm from the American Bible Company, and I'm sorry for the delay but the regional office wanted me to make a special trip out here to get this to your wife."

I looked at the dripping bundle. "A Bible?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

I crossed the room and crushed the beer can, dropping it into the drywall bucket beside my chair that served as my only trash can. "C'mon in and sit yourself down—dry off." I reached into the fridge, still sitting on the delivery skids, and pulled out two cans. "You want a beer?"

He stood there by the door, just a little uncertain. "I'm afraid I don't drink that, and I've got two more Bibles to deliver before I get to Douglas tonight."

I nodded and gazed out the windows at the frozen rain that swooped out of the darkness and crashed against the glass, sliding down and freezing in patterns that looked like bars. "How about a cup of tea?"

He paused but then spoke. "Tea."

I returned one of the cans to the refrigerator, opened mine, took a sip, and stared at him.

"Actually, tea would be nice."

I turned the kettle on with a soft pop of propane, snagged a dishcloth from the handle of the range, and crossed back toward him, handing him the towel. "Here, something to wipe your face off with." I gestured toward the sofa. "Have a seat."

"Thank you." He sat on the edge, his knees together, and reached a

hand out to pet Dog, who had returned to his spot beside the sofa. “Big dog.”

I stood by the back of my recliner, my arms resting on the Cheyenne blanket. “Yes, he is.”

“What kind?”

“Heinz, fifty-seven varieties.”

He laughed a polite laugh, and there was a long silence between us, long enough to make him uncomfortable. He glanced down the only hallway in the cabin and up into the loft. “Is Mrs. Longmire in?”

“No, she’s not.”

He nodded and looked down at the package in his hands. “Are you expecting her?”

“Not particularly.”

His eyes came back up. “The reason I ask is that there’s a financial remuneration concerning the model she ordered from the American Bible Company. Mrs. Longmire showed exquisite taste in ordering the special heritage edition.” He carefully shed the Tyvek from the tome and held it out for me to see. There were two other books that still lay swaddled in the bag. It was a very large, leatherlike volume with my wife’s name impressed with gilt lettering across the lower right-hand side of the cover.

I opened my can and took a swig as I marveled at the Bible in his hands. “Is that leather?”

He smiled. “Leatherette; superior. It wears better, and that’s something to take into consideration with a fine edition such as this that will be gracing your home and your children’s homes for years to come.”

I stepped back to the particleboard counter, turned over a mug, and retrieved one of the six-year-old tea bags from the cabinet. “I’m afraid all I’ve got is Earl Grey.”

“Oh, that’d be fine.” He took a deep breath and looked around, at the unfinished carpentry, the worn furniture, and the general untidiness of the place. “Is Mrs. Longmire away, visiting family?”

I ignored the question and crossed to my chair and leaned on the back, slightly arranging the blanket there. “When was it she ordered this Bible?”

He did his best to look ashamed. “I’m sorry to say that it was over six weeks ago, which is why the company sent me out personally to deliver the edition.” He shrugged. “I’m something of a problem solver—you see, with the special heritage version there are certain artisan aspects that simply can’t be rushed. It was a phone order, and I do apologize for any inconvenience the delay might’ve caused, but if you’ll just have a look at the craftsmanship.” He gestured the Bible toward me. “I’m sure that you’ll be amazed at the quality of detail.”

“How much is it?”

We both listened to the wind pressing the sleet against the log walls of the cabin. “The basic price of this special book is one hundred and forty-two dollars, but with the personalization option—you can see Mrs. Longmire’s name in twenty-four-karat gold here on the cover—the total comes to one hundred and eighty-eight dollars, not including tax, which you are exempt from considering this is an out-of-state purchase.”

“And where exactly is the American Bible Company located?”

He showed me his teeth. “Henderson, Nevada—right near Las Vegas. If you’re going to produce the good book, what better place than Sin City?”

I showed him my teeth in return. “Amen.”

He brightened and smiled more broadly. “Are you a religious man, Mr. Longmire?”

I sipped my beer. “Not so much. My wife used to tend to the religion for both of us—my interests were more akin to this world.”

“Used to?”

“My wife is dead, Mr. Sherman.”

He rested the Bible on his knee, the other two still lying at his feet, and leaned back as if he’d been struck. “I’m terribly sorry.” The wind, snow, and sleet continued to buffet the cabin as we sat there. “Was it sudden?”

“Evidently.”

“I’m shocked.”

I nodded. “Imagine how I feel.”

He shook his head. “I’m terribly sorry for your loss and even sorrier to intrude on your grief.”

“Thank you for your concern.” The kettle was beginning to grouse.

He nodded enthusiastically but then slowed with dramatic sorrow and held the Bible at an angle where I could easily read my late wife’s name. “Your wife, Martha, she was very keen on the idea. I was fortunate enough to speak with her personally.”

The kettle roused itself to full voice behind me. “Really?” It was now screaming. “I’d be interested to hear what she had to say—considering she’s been dead for six years.”

He didn’t move.

I took the last sip of my beer, crushed the can, and dropped it into the drywall bucket. I studied him for a moment more and then stepped to the range, picked up the kettle, and poured hot water into the mug. I stirred the mixture with a spoon and glanced back at him. “Do you take anything in it?”

He still didn’t move.

“Do you take anything in your tea?” I tapped the spoon on the rim of the mug and then carefully placed it on the edge of the sink. “Just as well,

because I don't have anything." I purposefully walked over to him and handed him the cup. "Yep, a little mix-up at the local paper."

He swallowed visibly.

I took the Bible from his hands, crossed the room, and plucked the blanket from my recliner, revealing the large-frame Colt .45 in the Sam Browne, and the six-pointed star of the Absaroka County Sheriff attached to my uniform shirt. "Sheriff." I glanced at the star, and then at my sidearm. "Sheriff Longmire."

I tossed the blanket onto the chair and sat with my elbows on my knees and the book in my lap. "It was a mistake. Ernie 'Man About Town' Brown went into Durant Memorial for surgery on his prostate and left a manila folder on his desk. The apprentice saw the file folder marked OBITUARIES and assumed they were current."

He still didn't move.

"I'd imagine it's hard to throw away the photos and obituaries of people you know. Michael Lenz, a friend of Ernie's who had died in a car crash back in the nineties, was there, along with Ernie's sister Yvonne, who passed almost twelve years ago—and my wife, Martha." I stared at the book in my lap. "Those two other Bibles at your feet wouldn't have Michael's and Yvonne's names on them, would they?"

He cleared his throat and spoke. "Mr. Longmire . . ."

"Sheriff." Another moment passed. "You know, there was this scam that they used to pull going all the way back to the dirty thirties when cheap presses made mass-market printing possible. These con men would drive around with the trunks of their cars filled with Bibles and they'd pick up the local newspaper and get the names from the obituaries, then they'd print the names on the Bibles and sell them to the aggrieved survivors."

He started to get up slowly, so as to not spill his tea.

I looked at him, my voice a little more than conversational. "Sit down." Dog heard the tone of my voice and planted his big paws on the floor, raising his head to look up at him. He stayed there for a second and then eased himself back onto the sofa.

I opened the cover and looked at the cheap, gold-edged pages with color separation that looked like newspaper comics, the inside cover of which was printed with a large tree with blank lines for family members. It wasn't a very good version of the good book, or of any other book for that matter.

"My mother used to drag me to church when I was a kid, and I would sit there looking at the stained glass windows and listening to the choir sing and wondering what the heck was wrong with me." I sighed and flipped a few more of the thin pages. "Never went back."

He cleared his throat, and I glanced at him, but he didn't say anything.

I looked at the Bible in my hands. "What do you suppose is the most important lesson in this book? That's what it is, right? A book of lessons on how it is we're supposed to treat each other." I took a deep breath. "I mean, if I was to read this book, what do you suppose is the most important thing I'd take away from it?"

This time his response took longer. "I'm not sure."

"I think this book is about forgiveness and tolerance." I looked up at him. "At least, you better hope so." I watched his eyes widen as my hand reached past my duty belt, and I pulled my checkbook from the seat of my uniform pants and my pen from my shirt pocket, which was just below the star. "One hundred and eighty-eight dollars, right?"

We sat there, looking at each other.

My eyes stayed steady with his. "Should I make this out to the American Bible Company or to you, Mr. Sherman?" He didn't say anything but just sat there, holding his mug. ". . . I'll just make it out to you." After signing the check and tearing it from the book, I tucked the Bible under my arm. "Well, it doesn't look as if you enjoy my tea or my company, and I don't want to hold you here any longer."

We stood. I took the mug and handed him the slip of paper.

He held the check.

"Don't worry, it's good, Mr. Sherman—and I'll be happy to deliver those other two Bibles to save you the trouble."

* * *

I watched as he turned the expensive car around. As he hit the gas, it slid a little, and my eyes followed the taillights as they disappeared down the ranch road.

I walked over to the northwest window where I'd begun the evening and sipped Mr. Sherman's untouched tea; it was still warm. Dog watched me as I pulled the special heritage edition Bible from under my arm and peered through the ice-rimed window to see if the owl had returned.

He hadn't.

Martha and I had argued that afternoon. I don't even remember what it was we'd argued about, but I remember the tone of her voice, the timbre and cadence. It's important to me sometimes to try and remember what it was that had been said, but I can't. I'm afraid that my mind works like that more and more these days, allowing the words spoken to disappear into cracks and crevices.

I thumbed the good book open, flipped through a few pages, and then closed it. The sleet had turned to snow, and the flakes caught the light from inside the cabin and burst into small sparks before pressing themselves against the glass.

I continued to look out into the raw night, but from habit my eyes drifted upward and I thought about how maybe I had softened a little, the words escaping with the memories. “You should’ve hung around.”

TOYS FOR TOTS

She's always enjoyed pushing buttons; I think she got it from her mother, who was always quick to punch for the floors when we got into elevators. She likes gadgets, phones, cameras, computers—anything with buttons. She adjusted the heater higher and turned the louvers in the vent toward herself, closing her eyes and savoring the warmth.

I didn't say anything as the windshield wipers, set on automatic, slapped across the glass three times.

"Gimme your gun."

"Why?"

"I wanna shoot you."

With more than a quarter century in law enforcement, I'm savvy to the holiday ways of criminals and emotionally disturbed people. "No."

She'd arrived from Philadelphia, and I was driving her down from the airport on the winding Zimmerman Trail descending into the shimmering retail lights of Billings, Montana. It was the holidays, and my daughter needed things. Cady pulled a few strands of strawberry blonde hair from her face with a bright grin. "So . . . I'll ask again, what do you want for Christmas?"

"I don't need anything."

She turned in the seat and, refusing to dim the cheer, reached back, scratching the fur behind Dog's ears. He grinned, too. "That—is *not* what I asked."

I navigated the traffic light at Grand and Twenty-Seventh Street. "I'd rather you saved your money." I slowed the truck and watched the first snowflakes drift down from the darkened sky in an innocent fashion, the way they always did; we were two hours from home across some of the emptiest high plains countryside, and I wasn't fooled. "Do we have to go to the mall?"

Three more slaps of the wipers.

The clear, frank, gray eyes opened and traveled across the defrosting windshield with a frost of their own that was doing anything but de. "You are not adopting the proper gift-purchasing and gift-giving attitude." She let that statement settle before continuing. "No, we don't have to go to the mall; but if you could run me down to Gillette, I'd like to get you a ton of bulk product for Christmas."

Gillette, Wyoming—one of the largest open-pit coal mines in the

world.

“A week ago, you said we could do some shopping when you picked me up.”

I did.

“You promised.”

I had.

She stretched out a hand, the Burberry coat sleeve riding up her arm, and flipped on the radio, readjusting the station to “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.” “You always get like this at the holidays.” She fooled with the search button, this time coming up with Andy Williams and “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.” “What’s the best gift Mom ever gave you?”

“You.”

Three slaps.

“Besides me.”

I thought about it but couldn’t really come up with anything. I added, as an afterthought, “She bought me these Peerless stainless-steel handcuffs that are on my belt.”

“I’m not buying you handcuffs for Christmas.” She pulled the visor down, sliding open the hidden mirror I always forgot was there, and smoothed her lip gloss with her index finger. “What about your radio?”

I glanced at my dash and Andy Williams. “What’s wrong with my radio?”

Cady snapped her reflection shut and flipped the visor up with a wave of her hand. “The one at home, the weather thinga-ma-jiggie.”

“The NOAA radio?”

She reinforced the point by throwing the finger with the lip gloss residue at me.

It was true—the thing had died. Everyone on the high plains has one sitting in their mud rooms—little, dark-gray plastic radios that pick up the frequency of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration so that their owners can find out just how many feet of snow are going to be on the ground in the morning. Dog had knocked the device from where it crouched on the counter, at which point it had stopped receiving the local NOAA alerts. I had finalized its demise with a Phillips screwdriver in an attempt to take it apart on my kitchen table while talking to my daughter long distance. “It died.”

She nodded in exasperation. “I know; you said you killed it.”

I glanced back at Dog. “It was natural causes.”

“So you *need* another one.” She emphasized the word with a smile.

I really didn’t; I’d gotten in the habit of not listening to it after my friend Henry Standing Bear had alerted me to the fact that I had a tendency to leave it on, giving Henry the impression that, although we

were in my kitchen, we were on a ship and he was getting seasick. I still suspected the Cheyenne Nation of moving the radio close to the edge of the counter where Dog could get tangled in the cord. The Bear had his own ways of knowing the weather and, better yet, knowing which way the wind blew.

“I guess.”

Excited with the thought that she had found the perfect gift, she nudged forward on the truck seat. “Where do you buy them?”

“Radio Shack.”

“Where’s Radio Shack?”

“The mall.”

Three slaps.

* * *

I successfully avoided the Rimrock Mall by suggesting that we go to one of the big-box stores, so I parked the Bullet beside a light post in the parking lot at Best Buy down by Big Bear Sports Center, near the MasterLube with the pro-Montana State mural that said GO, CATS! Cady slipped out the passenger side as I opened the suicide door and let Dog free onto the snow-dusted grass berm to relieve himself.

She came around the truck and stood with me, her arm linked with mine. Cady watched Dog lift his leg on the candy-striped lamppost, and I leaned against the fender, drew her closer to me, and studied the lights of the MasterLube. I was a good four hundred miles over and what I really needed was to get the oil changed in my truck.

“I’m not buying you an oil change for Christmas, either.”

I brought my eyes down to her as she watched Dog continue to pee. With the glistening in her eyes and the flakes resting gently on her hair like a blessing, she looked so much like her mother that I had to catch my breath in my mouth “You . . .” I bit the vapor escaping from my lungs along with my words.

She looked up at me. “Is it Mom?”

I glanced away and lifted up my hat, scratched the hair underneath, and then lodged it back on. “I don’t know . . . I guess.”

She nodded and bumped her hip into mine, pulling in even closer against my arm, and, when I wasn’t quick enough placing it around her. She squirmed her way into the crook and draped the offending appendage over her shoulder. “I miss her, too.”

“I know you do.”

She continued to watch Dog. “You need to get with the Christmas program, Daddy.”

“I know.”

She sighed against my chest, and I could feel the words welling up in her. “Dad, I may not be coming home for the holidays as much anymore. I’ve kind of got my own life back East, and I’m thinking I’d rather use the time off from the firm in the summer.”

I thought about my undersheriff Victoria Moretti’s younger brother, the Philadelphia patrolman who had asked my daughter for her hand and pretty much everything else. “Sure.”

“If this is our last Christmas together, I was thinking that it would be nice if it was a good one.”

“Uh-huh.”

Her head shifted past the thick collar of my sheepskin coat, where she could watch Dog. “That’s one long pee.”

I watched as he gave out with the last few surges. “He saves it up for when you come home.”

Dog, aware that we were talking about him, broke off the irrigation and came over to poke his jealous muzzle between us. Cady turned her face up and stood on tiptoe, grazing her glossed lips against my stubble.

“I’m probably going to get some things for some of the other people on my list, too, so in a very short period of time you will be required to brighten your mood and come in and help me carry. All right?”

Dog and I watched her twirl the black greatcoat, fling the tinsel-threaded cha-cha fun fur scarf over her shoulder, and march between the parked cars of the Best Buy parking lot as if it were the steppes of Russia.

I looked down at Dog. “Show off.”

Smiling and wagging, he looked up at me.

“Yep. Laugh now. PetSmart is right next door, and I bet she’ll want to get you a pair of those reindeer antlers with the jingle bells.”

After loading the beast back into the truck, I stood there for a minute, thinking that I really didn’t want to get in yet. The air was bracing, and maybe that’s what I needed, a little slap in the face. I stood there for a while watching the cars wheel in and out of the parking lot and hoping my mood would shift like the traffic.

I remembered the first Christmas with Cady and how she’d refused to go to bed—the life of the party at eight months. My wife and I had had a Christmas picnic by candlelight on a Hudson’s Bay blanket we had thrown on the floor beside the crib. It was the best Christmas dinner I ever remember having.

Glancing at my profile in the side window of my truck, the clinging flakes blocking my inspection just enough so that I could stand the view, I gave the hard eye to the left tackle of the almost-national-champion University of Southern California Trojans, to the First Division Marine investigator, and to the high sheriff of Absaroka County—informing him, in no uncertain terms, that it was time he straighten up and fly right.

He didn't seem overly impressed, so I took him for a walk.

* * *

It was crowded at the entrance of the electronics store, with the lights spilling from the whooshing pneumatic doors and the trumpeting of classical Christmas thundering against the heavy glass where stickers held a large red and white December calendar informing the world that only three days of shopping remained.

I ambled through the empty handicapped spots around a green Wrangler toward the concrete pillars that kept the populace from parking inside the store. My eyes shifted past the calendar to a lean young man in a Navy dress uniform and an arm sling. He stood by a large cardboard box that had been covered with gold- and silver-foil wrapping paper, on top of which was pasted a red toy train logo carrying the words TOYS FOR TOTS.

As an inactive Marine—because there is no such thing as an ex-Marine—I was intimate with the program that had been started back in '47 and had manned the bin in front of Buel's hardware store numerous Christmases back home in Durant.

The charity had been started by Marine reservist Major Will Hendricks when his wife, who had made a doll to donate to a needy child, couldn't find an organization to which she could give it. Along with being a Marine reservist, Hendricks had also been a director of public relations for Warner Brothers and used his considerable influence to place bins to collect used toys outside movie theaters. Decades later, collections had been switched to include only new toys when the mixed message of giving out hand-me-downs as a point of hope had become controversial. In the nineties, the secretary of Defense had approved Toys for Tots as an official mission of the Marine Corps Reserve.

I made eye contact with the young Navy chaplain. "You get drafted?"

He grinned. "We minister to the Marines, and since I'm on medical leave I'm considered an unofficial reservist." I looked down at his right sleeve and could now see the small cross above the arm bands. He dipped his head a little, going so far as to loosen the arm sling at his chest to reveal the collar underneath his uniform jacket. He looked up at me under the patent leather of his dress lid. "Semper Fi?"

I spread my gloved hands. "Ours is not to question why."

He stuck out his own hand. "Corporal Gene Burch."

We shook. "Lieutenant Walt Longmire."

"Whoa." He saluted and studied me closer. "Vietnam, Lieutenant?"

"'67-'68. You?"

"Afghanistan."

I glanced at the front of the store as the door swept open and a young couple exited with numerous bags; I stepped to the right and positioned myself out of the way. The chaplain gave the pair a smile, but they ducked away quickly, embarrassed at their lack of largess.

I shuffled my boots in the snow. "That must've been fun."

He nodded. "Until I dislocated my shoulder and they sent me back home on medical leave."

I studied him a little closer and pegged his age to be mid twenties. "How'd it happen?"

His turn to look embarrassed. "I got backed over by a Humvee."

I wasn't quite sure what to say to that and fell back on an old holiday favorite. "Well, at least you get to spend Christmas with your family."

He nodded again and looked at the riptide effect of the snow on the sidewalk as the doors continued to open and slide shut. "My father, he's the only one left—no brothers and sisters. I'm it." He glanced back up at me. "He was a jarhead, third division—Vietnam like you, Con Thien in '67."

I leafed through my military history and came up with the combat base and site of numerous battles only three kilometers from North Vietnam that most Marines had referred to as the Meat Grinder. "Gung ho."

"Yeah, he's pretty proud of that."

"Well, he must be glad to have you home."

His response held little enthusiasm. "Yeah." Another couple emerged, this time pausing to place a box with an electronic robot in the chaplain's hand. "Thank you both and have a Merry Christmas." He watched them half walk, half slip to their vehicle and then placed the toy in the half-full bin. "You have family in the store?"

"My daughter."

He looked beyond the large maroon metal-framed doors. "The redhead?"

"Yep."

"She waved and knew my rank."

"She would."

He glanced at me again, just to make sure I knew that there was no disrespect intended. "If you don't mind me saying so, sir—she's hot." I raised an eyebrow, and he shrugged a response. "Hey, I said I was a chaplain, not a eunuch."

I laughed. "She's in the process of trying to cajole me out of my bad holiday mood."

"Hey, it could be worse; you could be like my father and be in a bad mood year-round. I think it's hard for him; I mean, all he does is sit around the house and read the newspaper."

I wasn't quite sure what to say to that either, so I just stood there.

After a few swishes of the door, which produced one Barbie princess, he spoke again. "He's not a bad guy, my old man, but I don't think he understood me joining the Navy and certainly not joining the clergy." He paused again. "He was a career Marine and he keeps asking me about medals. You know, why it is that I don't have any."

I glanced down at the service bars and the Purple Heart on his chest, visible just under the sling.

"He says those don't count." He rearranged the injured arm and placed the other hand in his pants pocket. "I get the feeling that he thinks I'm some kind of . . . I don't know."

I thought about how the Army and Marines had lost a hundred chaplains during WWII—the third highest mortality rate behind the infantry and Army Air Corps—and how, on the USAT *Dorchester* in 1943, four chaplains had given their life jackets and lives for others.

"I'm sure he's very proud of you." I paused a moment and then went ahead. "When I was in Vietnam, I remember thinking how I was glad that I wasn't the guy without a weapon."

He smiled at me, and, as he accepted a *Spirit* DVD for the cause, I could hear that there seemed to be some sort of hubbub going on at the center of the store—probably a fight over the latest computer game cartridge.

"It takes a lot of guts to be in the thick of it on the front lines with nothing to take cover behind other than your convictions."

The young corporal nodded and looked at his highly polished shoes as the doors opened and shut two more times, the people departing looking over their shoulders.

I glanced back at him and was beginning to think I'd overstepped my ground when he spoke again. "Hey, I just sometimes wish that something had happened to me over there other than getting backed over by a truck. You know, something that I could be proud of when I talk to the old man."

I glanced over his head and could clearly see that something was happening inside the store as employees seemed to be converging and customers appeared to be moving away, some of them exiting very quickly and rushing by us into the parking lot without a thought of a toy for a tot. "Well, careful what you wish for. I'm betting you'll be going back."

"No, I'm getting stationed stateside: Naval Base Point Loma, California. He shrugged again. "I guess they decided I wasn't battlefield material." He looked sad at the idea. "At least it'll be warmer."

The doors opened again, and this time I could hear people screaming and yelling. The young officer turned his head as the glass slid shut and

then glanced at me.

“Something going on in there?”

I leaned sideways and could see a tall man pushing aside someone in a blue and yellow Best Buy vest and starting toward us with something under his jacket. “I’m not sure.”

The employee who had been shoved grabbed the man by the shoulder, but the large guy turned and made a quick, jerking move with his free hand and the employee fell to the floor, hugging his arm.

The big fellow took off at a dead run toward us, but as I started to move around Burch, he sidestepped directly in front of me. “What’s going . . .”

The large man, still holding something under his parka, charged through the sliding glass door into us.

The corporal was stormed over and fell backward into one of the concrete parking impediments, almost taking me with him, but I was lucky enough to latch onto the guy’s arm. I spun him around into the steel-reinforced glass beside the door, and his nose made the sound of a saltine cracker being neatly snapped in two. The laptop computer he’d been holding fell from his coat, along with the nylon-handled knife he’d had in the other hand.

He stood there for the briefest of moments and then took two and a half staggering steps before falling backward onto the hood of the Jeep, his iris rolling back in his head. I kicked the knife toward the corporal, who was working himself up onto his hand and knees.

Turning and grabbing the thief by the coat front, I lifted him a little further onto the hood of the Wrangler, pulled the handcuffs from my belt, and secured one of his wrists to the Jeep’s side-view mirror.

I reached down and helped Burch to his feet, scooped up the wicked-looking blade, and placed it in the sling hand. “Hey, that was something.”

He crooked his neck and looked up at me, stretching his eyelids as he massaged his recovering shoulder and stared at the knife in his hand. “What?”

People spilled from the store now, employees and customers alike, attempting to get a look at what had happened. I raised my voice to be heard over the general noise: “The way you took that guy out—that was something.”

Pulling my cuff keys from my belt, I slipped them into the breast pocket of his jacket. “The Billings PD should be here in about five minutes give or take.”

I stooped again, this time picking up the damaged computer and handing it to the store manager with the nametag that read DALE. “Did you see that? Boy howdy, that was something else.”

Dale looked at the chaplain, who was still shaking his head and

looking a little confused. “He did that?”

“Single-handedly.” I glanced at the young man’s sling and resisted making further comment.

It was about then that I felt someone grab my arm, crowding in close. “Daddy, you are not going to believe what just happened. This guy was stealing a laptop and then security confronted him and the guy started yelling and pulled out this knife. . . .” Cady looked past me to the man lying on the hood of the Jeep, still unconscious. “Jesus.”

I reached down and took her shopping bag, pulled Cady’s receipt out, and tore the end off. I plucked the pen from my shirt, scribbled a number down on the paper, and handed it to the manager. “Call Chris Rubich from the *Gazette* right now and you can get this in tomorrow’s paper; its good advertising and you’ve got a heck of a human interest story here.”

He nodded his way back into the store with the number in his hand and the laptop under his arm. I propelled my daughter past the gathering crowd but paused long enough to catch the eye of the chaplain, still trying to gather his wits. “Heck of a job, Corporal—heck of a job.”

I steered Cady past the Wrangler into the parking lot through the swirling snow and toward my three-quarter-ton as she whispered. “Did you have anything to do with that?”

“No.”

“Daddy?”

“No, I didn’t.” I loaded her in, started the engine, and began backing out as a Billings City Police car with siren trumpeting and light bar twinkling sledged across four lanes of opposing traffic and beelined for the Best Buy entrance.

As I waited, Cady leaned down and pulled out an interactive child’s reader from one of her shopping bags. “Damn it, I meant to put this in that corporal’s toy bin but you rushed us out of there so fast.” She unhooked her seat belt. “I’ll be right back.”

“I don’t think that’s such a great idea.”

She climbed out the passenger-side door. “I won’t be long, Dad. Honest Injun.” She grinned at me and tossed her head, strawberry blonde in full sway.

I sighed and watched in the rearview mirror as she ran, careful to avoid the Billings patrolmen as they loaded the would-be thief into the back of their cruiser. She paused and spoke to Burch, put the reader in the Toys for Tots box, and laughed.

Dog whined, and I reached back and petted him. “It’s all right. She’ll be here in a minute.”

Three delayed slaps of the windshield wipers and she’d returned.

She climbed in, shut the door behind her, and rehooked the belt as I slipped the truck into gear and pulled into the light traffic of King

Avenue. There were about two inches on the road and it felt like we were driving on a thick bed of quilt batting. Cady seemed preoccupied with the falling snow darting through the headlights like neon guppies, but I had to admit that my mood had improved.

Three more slaps and we were through the underpass and rolling quietly onto the blanketed surface of I-90 when, with a knowing smile, Cady reached up and clicked my handcuffs onto the rearview mirror. “Merry Christmas, Pops.”

UNBALANCED

She was waiting on the bench outside the Conoco service station/museum/post office in Garryowen, Montana, and the only part of her clothing that was showing was the black combat boots cuffed with a pair of mismatched green socks. When I first saw her; it was close to eleven at night, and if you'd tapped the frozen Mail Pouch thermometer above her head, it would've told you that it was twelve degrees below zero.

The Little Bighorn country is a beautiful swale echoing the Bighorn Mountains and the rolling hills of the Mission Buttes—a place of change that defies definition. Just when you think you know it, it teaches you a lesson—just ask the Seventh Cavalry.

I was making the airport run to pick up Cady, who had missed her connection from Philadelphia in Denver and was now scheduled to come into Billings just before midnight. The Greatest Legal Mind of Our Time was extraordinarily upset but had calmed down when I'd told her we'd stay in town that night and do some Christmas shopping the next day before heading back home. I hadn't told her we were staying at the Dude Rancher Lodge, a pet-friendly motor hotel that was assembled back in '49 out of salvaged bricks from the old St. Vincent's Hospital and was a family tradition. I loved the cozy feeling of the weeping mortar courtyard, the kitschy ranch-brand carpets, and the delicious home-cooked meals of the Stirrup Coffee Shop.

Cady, my hi-tech urban daughter, hated the place.

In my rush to head north, I hadn't gassed up in Wyoming and was just hoping that the Conoco had after-hours credit card pumps. They did, and it was as I was putting gas into my truck with the motor running that I noticed a person stand and trail out to where I stood, an old packing blanket billowing out from her shoulders.

Looking at the stars on the doors and then at me, she paused at the other side of the truck bed, her eyes ticktocking either from imbalance or self-medication. She studied my hat, snap-button shirt, the shiny brass name tag, and the other trappings of authority just visible under my sheepskin coat.

I buttoned it the rest of the way up and looked at her, expecting Crow, maybe Northern Cheyenne, but from the limited view afforded by the condensation of her breath and the cowl-like hood of the blanket, I could see that her skin was pale and her hair dark but not black, surrounding a

wide face and full lips that snared and released between the nervous teeth.

“Hey.” She cleared her throat and shifted something in her hands, still keeping the majority of her body wrapped. “I thought you were supposed to shut the engine off before you do that.” She glanced at the writing on the side of my truck. “Where’s Absaroka County?”

I clicked the small keeper on the pump handle, pulled my glove back on, and rested my elbow on the top of the bed as the tank filled. “Wyoming.”

“Oh.” She nodded but didn’t say anything more.

About five-nine, she was tall, and her eyes moved rapidly, taking in the vehicle and then me; she had the look of someone whose only interaction with the police was being roused: feigned indifference with just a touch of defiance and maybe just a little crazy. “Cold, huh?”

I was beginning to wonder how long it was going to take her, and thought about how much nerve she’d had to work up to approach my truck; I must’ve been the only vehicle that had stopped in hours. I waited. The two-way radio blared an indiscernible call inside the cab, the pump handle clicked off, and I pulled the nozzle, returning it to the plastic cradle. I hit the button to request a receipt, because I didn’t trust gas pumps any more than I trusted those robot amputees over in Deadwood.

Without volition, I found words in my mouth the way I always did in the presence of women. “I’ve got a heater in this truck.”

She snarled a quick laugh, strained and high. “I figured.”

I stood there for a moment more and then started for the cab—now she was going to have to ask. As I pulled the door handle, she started to reach out a hand from the folds of the blanket but then let it drop. I paused for a second more and then slid in and shut the door behind me, clicked on my seat belt, and pulled the three-quarter-ton down into gear.

She backed away and retreated to the bench as I wheeled around the pumps and stopped at the road. I sat there for a moment, where I looked at myself and my partner in the rearview mirror, then shook my head, turned around, and circled back in front of her. She looked up again as I rolled the window down on the passenger-side door and raised my voice to be heard above the engine. “Do you want a ride?”

Balancing her needs with her pride, she sat there huddled in the blanket. “Maybe.”

I sighed to let her know that my Good Samaritan deeds for the season weren’t endless and spoke through the exhaust the wind carried back past the truck window. “I was offering you a ride if you’re headed north.”

She looked up at the empty highway and was probably thinking about whether she could trust me or not.

“I have to be in Billings in a little over an hour to pick up my

daughter.” It’s always a good idea to mention other women in your life when faced with a woman in need; it usually reassures them by letting them know that there *are* other women in your life—and that you might not be a complete psycho. “Are you coming?”

The glint of temper was there again, but she converted it into standing and yanked something up from her feet—a guitar case that I hadn’t noticed before. She indifferently tossed it into the bed of my truck, still carefully holding the blanket around her with the other hand, her posture slightly off.

“You want to put your guitar in here, there’s room.”

She swung the door open, gathered the folds up around her knees, and slid in. “Nah, it’s a piece of shit.” She closed the door with her left hand and looked at the metal clipboard, my thermos, and the shotgun locked to the transmission hump. She blinked, and her eyes half closed as the waft of heat from the vents surrounded her, and we sat there longer than normal people would have. After a while her voice rose from her throat: “So, are we going or what?”

“Seat belt.” She opened her eyes and rapidly looked out the passenger window, and I placed her age at early twenties.

“Don’t believe in ’em.” She wiped her nose on the blanket, again using her left hand.

We didn’t move, and the two-way crackled as a highway patrolman took a bathroom break. She looked at the radio below the dash and then back at me, then pulled the shoulder belt from the retractor and swiveled to put it in the retainer at the center—it was about then that my partner swung his furry head around from the backseat to get a closer look.

“Jesus!” She jumped back against the door, and something slid from her grip and fell to the rubber floor mat with a heavy thump.

I glanced down and could see it was a small wood-gripped revolver.

She slid one of her boots in front of it to block my view, and we stared at each other for a few seconds, both of us deciding how it was we were going to play it.

“What the hell, man. . . .” She adjusted the blanket, careful to completely cover the pistol on the floorboard.

Thinking about what I was going to do as I spoke, I sat there without moving for a moment, then pulled onto the frontage road, and headed north toward the on-ramp of I-90. “That’s my partner—don’t worry, he’s friendly.”

She stared at the hundred-and-fifty-plus pounds of German shepherd, Saint Bernard, and who knew what. She didn’t look particularly convinced. “I don’t like dogs.”

“That’s too bad—it’s his truck.”

I eased the V10 up to sixty on the snow-covered road and motioned

toward the battered thermos leaning against the console. "There's coffee in there."

She looked, first checking to make sure the gun was hidden, and then reached down, and paused long enough so that I noticed her bare hands, strong and deft even with the remains of the cold. There was something else, though—a plastic medical bracelet, the kind that hospitals put on you to help remember who you are. She saw me watching her and quickly stuffed the municipal jewelry under the sleeve of a stained sweatshirt; then she lifted the thermos by the copper-piping handle, connected to the Stanley with two massive hose clamps, and read the sticker on the side: DRINKING FUEL. She twisted off the top and filled the chrome cap. "You got anything to put in this?"

"Nope."

She rolled her eyes and settled back against the door, careful not to move enough to re-produce the revolver. She pulled the blanket further up on her shoulders and crouched against the door like a cornered animal as she drank. "Good coffee."

"Thanks." I threw her a tenuous, conversational line and caught a glimpse of a nose stud and what might've been a tattoo at the side of her neck. "My daughter sends it to me."

The two-way squawked again as the highway patrolman came back on duty, and she glared at it. "Do we have to listen to that shit?"

I smiled and flipped the radio off. "Sorry, force of habit."

She glanced back at Dog, who regarded her indifferently as she nudged one foot toward the other in an attempt to push the revolver up and onto her other shoe. "So, you're the sheriff down there?"

"Yep."

She nonchalantly reached down, feigning an itch in order to snag the pistol. She slid it back under the blanket and carried it onto her lap.

"Your daughter live in Billings?"

"Philadelphia."

She nodded and murmured something I didn't catch.

"Excuse me?"

Her eyes came up, and I noticed they were an unsettling shade of green. "Philly Soul. The O'Jays, Patti LaBelle, the Stylistics, Archie Bell & the Drells, the Intruders . . ."

"That music's a little before your time, isn't it?"

She sipped her coffee and turned to stare out the windshield. "Music's for everybody, all the time."

We drove through the night. It seemed as if she wanted something, and I made the mistake of thinking it was talk. "The guitar case—you play?"

She watched the snow that had just started darting through my

headlights again. “Your dog sure has a nice truck.” We drifted under the overpass at the Blue Cow Café and Casino as an eighteen-wheeler, pushing the speed limit, became more circumspect in his velocity when I pulled from the haze of snow behind him and passed.

There was another long pause, and the muffled sound of the tires gave the illusion that we were riding on clouds. “I play guitar—lousy. Hey, do you mind if we power up the radio? Music, I mean.”

I stared at her for a moment and then gestured toward the dash. She fiddled with the SEEK button on FM, but we were in the dead zone between Hardin and Billings. “Not much reception this close to the Rez; why don’t you try AM—the signals bounce off the atmosphere and you can get stuff from all over the world.”

She flipped it off and slumped back against the door. “I don’t do AM.” She remained restless, glancing up at the visors and at the console. “You don’t have any CDs?”

I thought about it and remembered my friend Henry Standing Bear buying some cheap music at the Flying J truck stop months ago on a fishing trip to Fort Smith, Montana. The Bear had become annoyed with me when I’d left the radio on SEARCH for five minutes, completely unaware that it was only playing music in seven-second intervals. “You know, there might be one in the side pocket of that door.”

She moved and rustled her free hand in the holdall, finally pulling out a \$2.99 *The Very Best of Merle Haggard*. “Oh, yeah.”

She plucked the disc from the cheap cardboard sleeve and slipped it into a slot in the dash I’d never used. The lights of the stereo came on and the opening lines of Haggard’s opus “Okie from Muskogee” thumped through the speakers. She made a face, looked at the cover, and read the fine print. “What’d they do, record it on an eight-track through a steel drum full of bourbon?”

“I’m not so sure they sell the highest fidelity music in the clearance bin at the Flying J.”

Her face was animated in a positive way for the first time as the long fingers danced off the buttons of my truck stereo, and I noticed the blue metal-flake nail polish and the bracelet that clearly read LAKESIDE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL—LAKESIDE, TN.

“You’ve got too much bass and the fade’s all messed up.” She continued playing with the thing, and I had to admit that the sound was becoming remarkably better. Satisfied, she sat back in the seat, even going so far as to hold out her other hand for Dog to sniff. He did and then licked her wrist.

“I love singer/storytellers.” She scratched under the beast’s chin and for the first time since I’d met her seemed to relax as she listened to the lyrics. “You know this song is a joke, right? He wrote it in response to the

uninformed view of the Vietnam War. He said he figured it was what his dad would've thought."

I shrugged noncommittally.

She stared at the side of my face, possibly at my ear, or the lack of a tiny bit of it. "Were you over there?"

I nodded.

"So was my dad." Her eyes went back to the road. "That's why I'm going home; he died."

I navigated my way around a string of slow-moving cars. "What did your father do?"

Her voice dropped to a trademark baritone, buttery and resonant. "KERR, 750 AM. Polson, Montana."

I laughed. "I thought you didn't do AM."

"Yeah, well now you know why."

Merle swung into "Pancho and Lefty," and she pointed to the stereo. "Proof positive that he *did* smoke marijuana in Muskogee—he's friends with Willie Nelson."

I raised an eyebrow. "In my line of work, we call that guilt by association."

"Yeah, well, in my line of work we call it a friggin' fact, and Willie's smoked like a Cummins diesel everywhere, including Muskogee, Oklahoma."

I had to concede the logic. "You seem to know a lot about the industry. Nashville?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, so you're not a musician. What did you do?"

"Still do, when I get through in Polson." Her eyes went back to the windshield and her future. "Produce, audio engineer . . . Or I try to." She nibbled on one of the nails, on the hand that held the shiny cup. "Did you know that less than 5 percent of producers and engineers in the business are women?" I waited, but she seemed preoccupied, finally sipping her coffee again and then pouring herself another. "We're raised to be attractive and accommodating, but we're not raised to know our shit and stand by it." She was quiet for a while, listening to the lyrics. "Townes Van Zandt wrote that one. People think it's about Pancho Villa but one of the lines is about him getting hung—Pancho Villa was gunned down."

I nodded and glanced at her lap. "Seven men standing in the road in Hidalgo del Parral shot more than forty rounds into his roadster."

"You a history teacher before you were sheriff?" I didn't say anything, and the smile lingered on her face like fingerpicking on a warped-neck fretboard. "You're okay-looking, in a dad kind of way."

I widened my eyes. "That's a disturbing statement for a number of reasons."

She barked a laugh and raised one of the combat boots up to lodge it against the transmission hump, but realized she was revealing the pistol from the drape of the blanket on her lap and lowered her foot. "My dad never talked about it, Vietnam. . . . He handled that Agent Orange stuff and that shit gave robots cancer." Her eyes were drawn back to the windshield, and Polson. "He died last week and they're already splitting up his stuff." The mile markers clicked by like the wand on a metronome. "He taught me how to listen; I mean really listen. To hear things that nobody else heard. He had this set of Sennheiser HD414 open-back headphones from '73, lightweight with the first out-of-head imaging with decent bass—Sony Walkmans and all that stuff should get down and kiss Sennheiser's ass. They had a steel cord and you could throw them at a talented program director or a brick wall—I'm not sure which is potentially denser."

It was an unsettling tirade, but I still had to laugh.

"You don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Nope, but it all sounds very impressive." We topped the hill above Billings and looked at the lit-up refineries that ran along the highway as I made the sweeping turn west, the power of internal combustion pushing us back in the leather seats like we were tobogganing down the hill in a softened and diffused landscape. The tires ran silent and floated on a cushion of air headlong into the snowy dunes and shimmering lights that strung alongside the highway like fuzzy moons.

She turned away, keeping her eyes from me, afraid that I might see too much there. "You can just drop me at the Golden Pheasant; I've got friends doing a gig that'll give me a ride the rest of the way."

Nodding, I joined with the linear constellation of I-94.

I had a vague sense of the club's location downtown, took the Twenty-seventh Street exit, and rolled past the Montana Women's Prison and the wrong side of the railroad tracks, and then sat there watching a hundred coal cars of a Burlington Northern Santa Fe train roll by.

When she finally spoke, her voice was different, perhaps approaching the most sane of the night. "It belonged to my father. When I was leaving for Tennessee, he gave me a choice of those headphones I was telling you about, but I figured I'd have more use for the gun." She placed her hand on the dash and fingered the vent louvers as the two of us looked at the plastic strip on her wrist. "I got in some trouble down there." Her voice died in her throat, but after a moment she started again. "I got picked up by a few guys over in South Dakota earlier tonight and they tried stuff. They seemed nice at first. . . ." She gestured with the pistol, still under the blanket. "Anyway, I had to pull it."

I turned down a side street and took a right, where I could see the multicolored neon of the aforementioned pheasant spreading his tail

feathers in a provocative manner. I parked the truck in the first available spot and turned to look at the girl with the strange eyes, the sifting snow providing a surreal backdrop to her darkened and backlit portrait.

"I didn't shoot anybody."

"Good."

She smiled and finished the dregs of her coffee, wiped the cup out on her blanket, and screwed the top back on the thermos. She placed it against the console, but the movement caused the revolver to slip from her leg and onto the seat between us.

We both sat there looking at it, representative of all the things for which it stood.

I leaned forward and picked it up. It had been a nice one once upon a time, but years of negligence had left it scuffed and rusted, emerald corrosion growing from the rounds permanently imbedded in the cylinder. "How 'bout I keep this for you?"

She didn't say anything for a long time but finally slipped through the open door, pulled the guitar case from the bed of my truck, letting it fall to the sidewalk, and stood there in the opening.

The plaintive words of Haggard's "A Place to Fall Apart" drifted from the speakers, and she glanced at the radio as if the Okie from wherever might be sitting on my dash. "I'd give a million dollars if he'd go into a studio, just him and a six-string guitar, no backup singers, no harps—and just play."

I watched her face, trying to not let the eyes distract me. "Maybe you should tell him that sometime, but I wouldn't look for him in Muskogee."

The wind pressed the blanket against her, urging departure, and I was struck by the sudden vulnerability in her face as she closed the door, the words barely audible: "Merry Christmas."

She continued to clutch the blanket around her as she turned, dragging the guitar case and walking away without looking back. She disappeared into the swinging glass doors with swirls of snow devils circling after her, and all I could think was that I was glad I wasn't in Polson, Montana and in possession of a set of Sennheiser HD414 open-back headphones.

I thought about the things you could do, and the things you couldn't, even in a season of miracles.

I tossed the decrepit revolver into my glove box, sure that whoever pulled the trigger on the thing had an equal chance of getting hurt as the person at whom it was being pointed.

Twenty minutes later, my daughter climbed in the cab. "Please tell me we're not staying at the Dude Rancher."

I smiled, and she pulled the shoulder belt around in a huff as Merle softened his tone with one of my favorites, "If We Make It Through

December.”

She ruffled Dog’s hair and kissed his muzzle, and it must’ve taken a good thirty seconds before she remarked, “Did you get a new stereo in the truck? It sounds really good.”

**Read on for the first chapter of *The Cold Dish*, the first novel in
the Walt Longmire Mystery Series.
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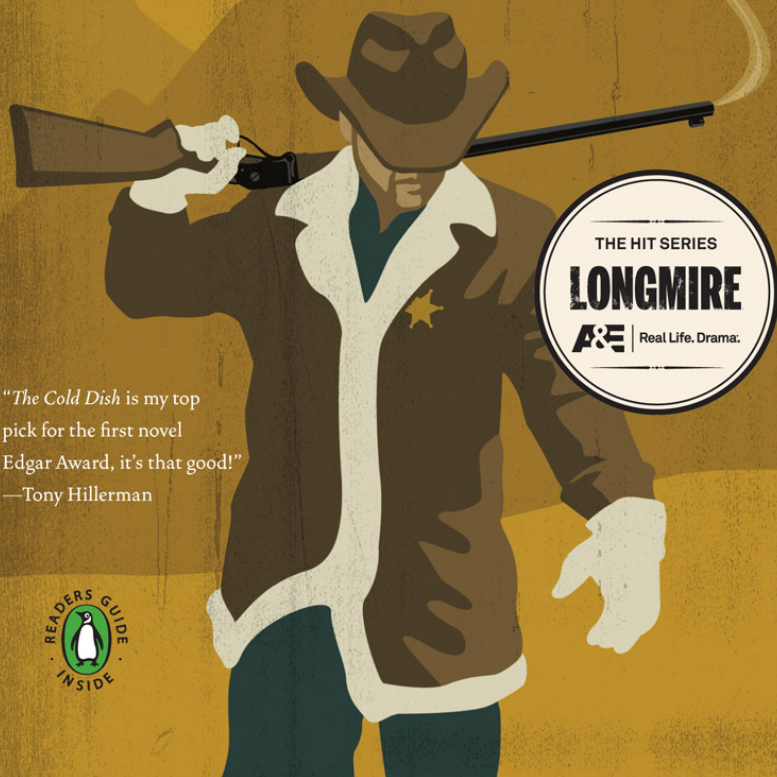
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THE COLD DISH

THE FIRST NOVEL IN THE WALT LONGMIRE MYSTERY SERIES



*"The Cold Dish is my top
pick for the first novel
Edgar Award, it's that good!"*
—Tony Hillerman



“Bob Barnes says they got a dead body out on BLM land. He’s on line one.”

She might have knocked, but I didn’t hear it because I was watching the geese. I watch the geese a lot in the fall, when the days get shorter and the ice traces the rocky edges of Clear Creek. The sheriff’s office in our county is an old Carnegie building that my department inherited when the Absaroka County Library got so many books they had to go live somewhere else. We’ve still got the painting of Andy out in the landing of the entryway. Every time the previous sheriff left the building he used to salute the old robber baron. I’ve got the large office in the south side bay, which allows me an unobstructed view of the Big Horn Mountains to my right and the Powder River Valley to my left. The geese fly down the valley south, with their backs to me, and I usually sit with my back to the window, but occasionally I get caught with my chair turned; this seems to be happening more and more, lately.

I looked at her, looking being one of my better law-enforcement techniques. Ruby’s a tall woman, slim, with a direct manner and clear blue eyes that tend to make people nervous. I like that in a receptionist / dispatcher, keeps the riffraff out of the office. She leaned against the doorjamb and went to shorthand, “Bob Barnes, dead body, line one.”

I looked at the blinking red light on my desk and wondered vaguely if there was a way I could get out of this. “Did he sound drunk?”

“I am not aware that I’ve ever heard him sound sober.”

I flipped the file and pictures that I’d been studying onto my chest and punched line one and the speakerphone button. “Hey, Bob. What’s up?”

“Hey, Walt. You ain’t gonna believe this shit. . . .” He didn’t sound particularly drunk, but Bob’s a professional, so you never can tell. He was silent for a moment. “Hey, no shit, we got us a cool one out here.”

I winked at Ruby. “Just one, huh?”

“Hey, I ain’t shittin’ you. Billy was movin’ some of Tom Chatham’s sheep down off the BLM section to winter pasture, and them little bastards clustered around somethin’ in one of the draws. . . . We got a cool one.”

“You didn’t see it?”

“No. Billy did.”

“Put him on.”

There was a brief jostling of the phone, and a younger version of Bob’s

voice answered, "Hey, Shuuriff."

Slurred speech. Great. "Billy, you say you saw this body?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What'd it look like?"

Silence for a moment. "Looked like a body."

I thought about resting my head on my desk. "Anybody we know?"

"Oh, I didn't get that close."

Instead, I pushed my hat farther up on my head and sighed. "How close did you get?"

"Couple hundred yards. It gets steep in the draws where the water flow cuts through that little valley. The sheep stayed all clustered around whatever it is. I didn't want to take my truck up there 'cause I just got it washed."

I studied the little red light on the phone until I realized he was not going to go on. "No chance of this being a dead ewe or lamb?" Wouldn't be a coyote, with the other sheep milling around. "Where are you guys?"

"Bout a mile past the old Hudson Bridge on 137."

"All right, you hang on. I'll get somebody out there in a half hour or so."

"Yes sir. . . . Hey, Shuuriff?" I waited. "Dad says for you to bring beer, we're almost out."

"You bet." I punched the button and looked at Ruby. "Where's Vic?"

"Well, she's not sitting in her office looking at old reports."

"Where is she, please?" Her turn to sigh and, never looking at me directly, she walked over, took the worn manila folder from my chest, and returned it to the filing cabinet where she always returns it when she catches me studying it.

"Don't you think you should get out of the office sometime today?" She continued to look at the windows.

I thought about it. "I am not going out 137 to look at dead sheep."

"Vic's down the street, directing traffic."

"We've only got one street. What's she doing that for?"

"Electricals for the Christmas decorations."

"It's not even Thanksgiving."

"It's a city council thing."

I had put her on that yesterday and promptly forgot about it. I had a choice: I could either go out to 137, drink beer, and look at dead sheep with a drunk Bob Barnes and his half-wit son or go direct traffic and let Vic show me how displeased she was with me. "We got any beer in the refrigerator?"

"No."

I pulled my hat down straight and told Ruby that if anybody else called about dead bodies, we had already filled the quota for a Friday and

they should call back next week. She stopped me by mentioning my daughter, who was my singular ray of sunshine. "Tell Cady I said hello and for her to call me."

This was suspicious. "Why?" She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. My finely honed detecting skills told me something was up, but I had neither the time nor the energy to pursue it.

I jumped in the Silver Bullet and rolled through the drive-through at Durant Liquor to pick up a sixer of Rainier. No sense having the county support Bob Barnes's bad habits with a full six-pack, so I screwed off one of the tops and took a swig. Ah, mountain fresh. I was going to have to drive by Vic and let her let me know how pissed off she was bound to be, so I pulled out onto Main Street, joined the three-car traffic jam, and looked into the outstretched palm of Deputy Victoria Moretti.

* * *

Vic was a career patrol person from an extended family of patrol people back in South Philadelphia. Her father was a cop, her uncles were cops, and her brothers were cops. The problem was that her husband was not a cop. He was a field engineer for Consolidated Coal and had gotten transferred to Wyoming to work at a mine about halfway between here and the Montana border. When he accepted the new position a little less than two years ago, she gave it all up and came out with him. She listened to the wind, played housewife for about two weeks, and then came into the office to apply for a job.

She didn't look like a cop, least not like the ones we have out here. I figured she was one of those artists who had received a grant from the Crossroads Foundation, the ones that lope up and down the county roads in their \$150 running shoes and their New York Yankee ball caps. I'd lost one of my regular deputies, Lenny Rowell, to the Highway Patrol. I could have brought Turk up from Powder Junction but that had appealed to me as much as gargling razor blades. It wasn't that Turk was a bad deputy; it's just that all that rodeo-cowboy bullshit wore me out, and I didn't like his juvenile temper. Nobody else from in county had applied for the job, so I had done her a favor and let her fill out an application.

I read the Durant Courant while she sat out in the reception room scribbling on the front and back of the damn form for half an hour. Her writing fist began to shake and by the time she was done, her face had turned a lively shade of granite. She flipped the page onto Ruby's desk, hissed "Fuck this shit," and walked out. We called all her references, from field investigators in ballistics to the Philadelphia Chief of Police. Her credentials were hard to argue with: top 5 percent out of the academy, bachelor's in law enforcement from Temple University with nineteen

credit hours toward her master's, a specialty in ballistics, two citations, and four years street duty. She was on the fast track, and next year she would've made detective. I'd have been pissed, too.

I had driven out to the address that she'd given me, a little house trailer near the intersection of both highways with nothing but bare dirt and scrub sage all around it. There was a Subaru with Pennsylvania plates and a GO OWLS bumper sticker, so I figured I was in the right place. When I got up to the steps, she already had the door open and was looking at me through the screen. "Yeah?"

I was married for a quarter century and I've got a lawyer for a daughter, so I knew how to deal with these situations: Stay close to the bone, nothing but the facts, ma'am. I crossed my arms, leaned on her railing, and listened to it squeal as the sheet metal screws tried to pull loose from the doublewide's aluminum skin. "You want this job?"

"No." She looked past me toward the highway. She didn't have any shoes on, and her toes were clutching the threadbare carpet like cat's claws in an attempt to keep her from spinning off into the ether. She was a little below average height and weight, olive complexion, with short black hair that kind of stood up in pure indignity. She'd been crying, and her eyes were the color of tarnished gold, and the only thing I could think of doing was to open the screen door and hold her. I had had a lot of problems of my own of late, and I figured we could both just stand there and cry for a while.

I looked down at my brown rough-outs and watched the dirt glide across the porch in underlining streaks. "Nice wind we've been having." She didn't say a word. "Hey, you want my job?"

She laughed. "Maybe."

We both smiled. "Well, you can have it in about four years, but right now I need a deputy." She looked out at the highway again. "But I need a deputy who isn't going to run off to Pittsburgh in two weeks." That got her attention.

"Philadelphia."

"Whatever." With that, I got all the tarnished gold I could handle.

"Do I have to wear one of those goofy cowboy hats like you?"

I glanced up at the brim of my hat and then back down to her for effect. "Not unless you want to."

She cocked her head past me, nodding to the Bullet. "Do I get a Batmobile like that to drive around in?"

"You bet."

That had been the first dissemblance of many to come.

I took a big swig and finished off the first Rainier beer and popped it back in the carton. I could see the muscles in her jaw flex like biceps. I made her knock on the window before I rolled it down. "What's the problem, officer?"

She looked pointedly at her watch. "It's 4:37, where the hell are you going?"

I relaxed back into the big bucket seat. "Close enough. I'm going home." She just stood there, waiting. It was one of her best talents, asking questions and just standing there, waiting for an answer. "Oh, Bob Barnes called, says they got a dead body out between Jim Keller's place and Bureau of Land Management."

She yanked her head back and showed me a canine tooth. "They saw a dead body. Yeah, and I'm a fucking Chinese fighter pilot."

"Uh huh, looks like the big sheepocide we've all been waiting for." It was the shank of the afternoon, and the one beer was already helping to improve my mood. The sky was still a VistaVision blue, but there was a large cloud bank to the northwest that was just beginning to obscure the mountains. The nearer clouds were fluffy and white, but the backdrop was a darker, bruised color that promised scattered snow at high altitudes.

"You look like hammered shit."

I gave her a look out of the side of my eye. "You wanna go out there?"

"It's on your way home."

"No, it's past there, out on 137."

"It's still a lot closer to you, and seeing as you're going home early . . ."

The wind was beginning to pick up. I was going to have to go long on this one. "Well, if you don't want to . . ."

She gave me another look. "You have done nothing but sit in your office, on your ass, all day."

"I'm not feeling real well, think I might be getting the flu or something."

"Maybe you should go out and get some exercise. How much do you weigh now? Two-sixty?"

"You have a mean streak." She continued to look at me. "Two-fifty-three." It sounded better than two-fifty-five.

She stared at my left shoulder in deep concentration, juggling the evening that she must have had planned. "Glen isn't coming home till late." She looked at herself in the side-view mirror and instantly looked away. "Where are they?"

"On 137, about a mile past the old Hudson Bridge." This was working out pretty well. "They're in Billy's truck." She started to push off and walk away. "They wanted you to pick up some beer on your way out."

She turned and tapped a finger on the passenger door. "If I was going to bring them beer, I would take that depleted six-pack in the seat beside you, mister. You know, we have an open container law in this state."

I watched her man-walk with the sixteen-shot automatic bouncing on her hip. "Hey, I try and have an open container with me no matter what state I'm in." She was smiling when she slammed the door of her five-year-old unit. It's good when you can bring unbridled happiness to your fellow workers. I nosed the three-quarter ton out to the west side of town, and Vic must've passed me doing an even eighty, sirens and lights all going full blast. She gave me the finger as she went by.

* * *

I had to smile. It was Friday, I had five beers in attendance, and my daughter was supposed to call this evening. I drove out through Wolf Valley and ignored the scattered, out-of-state vehicles parked illegally along the road. During the latter part of hunting season, my part of the high plains becomes a Disneyland for every overage boy with a high-powered toy. Instead, I watched the clouds slowly eat the Bighorn Mountains. There was a little early snow up there, and the setting sun was fading it from a kind of frozen blue to a subtle glow of purple. I had lived here my entire life, except for college in California and a stint in the marines in Vietnam. I had thought about those mountains the entire time I was gone and swore that a day wouldn't go by when I got back that I wouldn't look at them. Most of the time, I remembered.

By the time I got out to Crossroads there was a fine silting of confectionery snow blowing across the road and falling through the sage and range grass. The shadows were long when I stopped at the mailbox. There was nothing but a Doctor Leonard's Healthcare sale catalog, which scared me it was so interesting. I navigated the irrigation ditch and drove up to the house.

Martha had grown up on her family ranch, some couple thousand-odd acres near Powder Junction, and had always hated being a townie. So, three years ago, we bought a little land off the Foundation, got one of those piles of logs they call a kit, drilled a well, and planted a septic tank. We sold the house in town, because Martha was in such a hurry to get out of it, and lived in a trailer I had borrowed from Henry Standing Bear, owner of the Red Pony and my oldest friend. By the fall, we had her all closed in and the heat on. Then Martha died.

I parked the truck on the gravel, pulled out the beer, and walked on the two-by-twelves over the mud that led up to the door. I'd been meaning to get some grass seed, but the snow kept putting an end to that. I pushed the door open and stepped up from the cinder block onto the

plywood floor. The place still needed a little work. There were some interior walls but most were just studs and, when you turned the bare bulbs on, the light slipped through the wooden bars and made patterns on the floor. The electricals weren't done, so I had two four-ways plugged into the box and everything just ran into them. The plumbing was done, but I used a shower curtain as a bathroom door; consequently, I didn't get many visitors. There was a prewar, Henry F. Miller baby grand that had belonged to my mother-in-law, on which I had been known to pound out a little boogie-woogie, but I hadn't played it since Martha had died. I had my books all stacked in beer boxes near the back wall and, the Christmas before last in a fit of holiday optimism, Cady and I had gone out and bought a floor lamp, an easy chair, and a Sony Trinitron color television. The lamp and easy chair worked really well, whereas the TV did not. Without a dish, the only thing you could pick up was Channel 12 with snow for a picture and a soothing hiss for sound. I watched it religiously.

I had the phone set up on a cardboard box next to the chair so I wouldn't have to get up to answer it, and I had a cooler on the other side for the beer. I threw my coat and hat on the boxes, switched on my lamp, and sat down in my chair with Doctor Leonard in my lap. I flipped the catalog open to page three and pondered a genuine artificial sheepskin cover made for all standard recliners. I glanced up at the stacked log walls and tried to decide between the available ivory and the rich chestnut. Didn't really matter. After four years, I had yet to make any truly decisive steps in interior decor. Perhaps Doctor Leonard's machine-washable polyester acrylic fleece was my Iliad. This thought was unsettling enough to motivate the fourth beer, which was only slightly warmer than the first three. I screwed off the top, pinching it between thumb and forefinger, and tossed it into the drywall bucket that served as my only trash can. I thought about calling the Doc's 1-800 number but was afraid that I might block Cady's call. She had tried to get me to get call waiting, but I figured I got interrupted enough during the course of a day and didn't need to pay for the privilege at home. I hit the remote and surfed from automatic four to destination twelve: ghost TV. It was my favorite show, the one where the different-sized blobs moved around in a blizzard and didn't make too much noise. Gave me plenty of time to think.

* * *

I retraced the well-worn path of my thoughts to the report that had been lying on my chest when Ruby had come into the office. I didn't really need the actual file. I had every scrap of paper in it memorized. There is a black-and-white photograph that I had cropped down, the kind we use to attach a person to a particular brand of misery. Place photo here. The

background is a vacant white, broken only by the shadow of an electric conduit, no proper venue for intimacy such as this. In another setting, the portrait might have been a Curtis or a Remington.

Melissa is Northern Cheyenne. In the photograph, she has dark stalks of healthy hair arching to her shoulders, but there are small discolorations there and at her throat, multiple bruises, and a contusion at the jawline. I hear noises when I summon up these wounds. To the trained eye, her features might appear a touch too small, like the petals on a bud not yet opened. Her almond-shaped eyes are unreadable. I keep remembering those eyes and the epicanthic folds at the inner corners. There are no tears. She could have been some half-Asian model in one of those ridiculously perfumed glamour magazines, but she is that poor Little Bird girl who was led into a basement and gang-raped by four teenage boys who didn't care that she had fetal alcohol syndrome.

Three years ago. After all the proceedings and counterproceedings, filings and counterfilings, the case went to court in May. I remember because the sage was blooming, and the smell hurt the inside of my nose. The girl in the photo had fidgeted and twisted in her seat, sighed, placed her hands over her eyes, then pulled her fingers through her hair. She crossed her legs and shifted her weight and laid her head, facedown, on the witness stand.

"Confused . . ." That's all she said, "Confused . . ."

There are other photographs in the file, color ones I'd clipped from the Durant High School yearbook. In a fit of comic relief, I had left the blurbs from their yearbook attached to the pictures: Cody Pritchard, football, track; Jacob and George Esper, fraternal twins in birth as well as football, tie-and-fly club, and Future Farmers of America; and Bryan Keller, football, golf, debate, student council, honor roll.

They had inserted a broomstick into her, a bottle, and a fungo bat.

I was the reluctant investigating officer, and I had known Mary Roebling since we were kids. Mary teaches English at Durant High School and is the girls' basketball coach. She said she had asked Melissa Little Bird about the marks on her face and arms but couldn't seem to get a straight answer. Later, Melissa complained about abdominal pains and blood in her urine. When Mary demanded to know what had happened, Melissa said that she had sworn that she wouldn't tell. She was worried that she might hurt the boys' feelings.

Ruby says I get the file out about once a week since the trial. She says it's unhealthy.

At Mary Roebling's request, I went to the high school in the afternoon during basketball practice. While the girls ran laps, I took off my badge, cuffs, and gun and placed them in my hat behind her desk. I sat in the office and played with the pencils until I became aware of the two of

them standing in the doorway. Mary was about six even and had told me quite frankly that the only reason she had gone to the junior prom with me was because I was one of the only boys in class who was taller than she. She towered over the Little Bird girl and kept her from backing though the door by placing her hands on Melissa's shoulders. The young Indian was coated in a youthful gleam of sweat and, if not for the marks on her face and shoulders and the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, looked like she had just been freshly minted. I held up one of the American Number Two pencils and said, "I can't figure out how they get the lead on the inside." To my surprise, her face became suddenly dark as she contemplated the issue. "I figure they got these trees that have the lead already in them." Her face brightened in the relief of having the riddle solved.

"You're the sheriff." Her voice was childlike and carried all the trust in the world. I was back twenty-five years with Cady in front of a Saturday morning Sesame Street, watching "Policemen Are Our Friends."

"Yep, that's me." Her eyes had traveled all the way from the rounded-toe boots to the matted silver hair that I'm sure was sticking out at undefined angles.

"Blue jeans."

We were the third county in Wyoming to adopt blue jeans as regular duty uniform, but it was one of the downfalls of our particular brand of vehicular law enforcement that the common populace rarely saw us from the waist down. "Yep, big around as they are long." Mary tried to stifle a laugh, and the girl looked to her, then back to me. Rarely do you get those glimmers of unadulterated love and, if you're smart, you pack them away for darker days. I started to get up but thought better of it.

"Melissa, is your uncle Henry Standing Bear?" I figured the best way to get started was to establish some kind of personal reference.

"Uncle Bear." Her smile was enormous. Henry was one of the most understated prophets I knew and one of the most personally interested individuals I had ever met.

I gestured for her to sit across from me and rolled up the left sleeve of my shirt to display the ghostly cross-hatchings that stretched back from my left hand. "I got hurt playing pool with your uncle Bear up in Jimtown, once . . ." The girl's eyes widened as she sat in the chair opposite me, and she instinctively reached to place a forefinger on the marbled flesh of my forearm. Her fingers were cool, and her palms were strangely devoid of any lines, as if her life was yet to be determined. I reached across the desk slowly, sliding a palm under her chin and lifting to accentuate an angry contusion at the jawline. "That's a good one, too." She nodded with a slight movement that freed her face, and she dropped her eyes to the desktop, which informed us of the potential for the

president's physical fitness award. "How'd you get that?" She covered the offending jaw with a quick look to the side and a through-the-eyebrow glance at Mary.

"Melissa, I'm not here to hurt anybody, but I also want to make sure that nobody hurts you." She nodded and began gently rocking back and forth, hands firmly clasped between her legs. "Has anybody hurt you?" Her attention stayed with the glass-covered surface of Mary's desk.

"No."

I studied Melissa's reflection and tried to imagine her as she should have been. Her people were strong, clear-eyed Cheyenne from the Northern Reservation, with a little Crow from her maternal side. I tried to see a Melissa who hadn't had the spark of curiosity robbed from her by a mother who had ingested too many I-90 Cocktails—Lysol and rubbing alcohol—when she was pregnant. Melissa should have been a beautiful Indian maiden standing on the rolling, grassy hills of the Little Big Horn, arms outstretched to a future that held promise, security, and freedom. When I looked up, it was as if she had read my mind, that we had shared a vision. She had stopped rocking and was looking at the diamond snaps on my shirt.

"It was romantic." She said it flat, as if emotion would only rob her statement of its impact. Her eyes returned to the desk.

I leaned back in the office chair, allowing my fingertips to remain on the edge of the beveled glass. "What was romantic, Melissa?"

She spoke to the desk. "The walk."

* * *

I was out of beer, Cady still hadn't called, and I had given up on Doctor Leonard's sheepskin cover as the salvation of a future well-coordinated interior. I needed a Rainier and some company so I cranked my hat down hard, buttoned my sheepskin jacket up tight, and stepped into the horizontal snow flurries that were whipping around the corner of the house. I figured I'd drive the half mile down the paved road to the Red Pony. I stood there on the planks for a moment, listening to something above the wind, wings whirring only thirty feet off the ground as the geese honked their warning cries to each other in an attempt to get south. Maybe they had waited too long to leave. Maybe I had, too.

Off in the distance, I could make out the neon pony cantering in the darkness and a small number of peripheral trucks parked in the adjacent gravel lot. As I got closer, I could see that the inside lights of the bar were not on and felt a surge of panic at the thought of having to drive all the way back into town for a beer. I parked the truck and could make out a few figures moving in the darkened window of the carryout. Couldn't

have been a blackout; the red neon pony shimmered across my hood and up the windshield. I pushed into the wind to open the bar's glass door and came within inches of running into the owner and operator of the Red Pony, Henry Standing Bear.

Henry and I had known each other since grade school when we had gotten into a fight at the water fountain, and he had loosened two of my teeth with a roundhouse left that had come from the Black Hills. We had played against each other in the trenches of interior linemanship from peewee through high school, whereupon I finished up at USC, lost my deferment, got drafted by the marines, and went to Vietnam. Henry had made a halfhearted attempt at the white man's educational system at Berkeley and had learned enough to protest against it before being rewarded for his efforts with an all-expense-paid, four-year vacation with the Special Forces SOG group at An Khe. It was here that Henry said he had learned of the white man's true vision and power, of his ability to kill the largest number of individuals in the most effective manner possible.

Upon his return to the States, Henry had reattempted college life but found that his ability for being lectured to had deteriorated. He returned to political activity in the seventies and had been a seminal member of every Native American movement for the next ten years. Sensing that revolution is the industry of young men, however, he returned to Absaroka County for the funeral of the grandmother who had raised him and somewhere came up with enough cash to finance a deal with the Foundation that would transform an old Sinclair station, the only public building in Crossroads, into a kind of half-assed bar that he called the Red Pony. Henry had been known to read a great deal of Steinbeck. It was in the Foundation's interest to promote the bar, if for no other purpose than to keep the shit-caked rubber boots of the locals out of their oriental-carpeted meeting rooms.

We looked at each other, his expression carrying the quiet selfdeprecation that usually held some hidden meaning. "Beer, Tonto?" he asked as he handed me an open Rainier and continued past with what appeared to be a tire iron in the other hand. I looked through the poolroom into the bar proper and could make out about eight people seated on stools, outlined by the fluorescent glow of the beer coolers. Big night. I took a sip and followed him to the far end of the room where he seemed to be preparing to tear apart the wall. Leaning against the offending structure he slipped the flat end of the tire iron behind the weenie-wood that made up the interior of the bar.

"You forget to pay your REA bill again?" He paused for a second to give me a dirty look and then put all 220 pounds into the tire iron and propelled the four-foot board from the wall, with nails still attached, to clatter at our feet. I bent from my vantage point to look at the

ringshanked holes in the plaster surface that lay underneath the removed board. Henry's face was, as always, impassive.

"Damn." Without another word, he slipped the tire iron beneath the next board and popped it to the floor. Same result. "Damn."

I figured it was time to ask, "Are we redecorating, or are we looking for something specific?" He gestured to the wall with a hand that pleaded and threatened at the same time.

"Fuse box."

"You covered it up with boards?"

Another sidelong glance. "At least I have walls."

Henry was one of the chosen few who had been to the cabin. His statement was hard to refute. "I've been thinking about getting an imitation sheepskin cover for my recliner." This got a long look.

"Are you drunk?"

I gave the question thought. "No, but I'm working on it." He grunted a little laugh and popped off another board, which added to the considerable pile that was collecting at our feet.

"Damn." He placed the tire iron in the next board. "Cady call you?"

"No, the brat."

"Huh . . . She called me." He popped the board loose to reveal the gray cover of an ancient fuse box. "Yes."

I turned to look at him. "What?"

He tapped the small, metal cover and glanced at me. "Fuse box."

"Cady called you?" His eyes were dark and clear, the far one split by the strong nose that I knew had been broken at least three times, once by me.

"Yes."

I tried to contain myself and sound casual, but he had me and he knew it. "When did she call?"

"Oh, a little while ago . . ." His casual was far more convincing than mine.

With a forefinger he pulled open the small metal box to reveal four fuses that looked as if they hadn't been changed since Edison was a child. The box itself was rusted out in the back, victim of some age-old roof leak. The conduits surrounding it were rotten and peeled back, revealing frayed tendrils of green and black corroded wire. The four fuses were covered in a thick coat of dust and were surrounded by sockets, which held a strange patina of white and green crystals. They looked like two sets of angry eyes embedded in the wall, just waiting to unleash 220 volts into anything that came close.

He placed a hand on the uneven surface of the plaster where he had taken most of the wall apart and leaned all his weight against it. His other hand brushed back the crow-black hair, smattered with touches of silver,

in an arch over his shoulder and down the small of his back. "One in four, I like the odds."

"Did she say anything about calling me?"

"No. Hey . . ." He bristled with mock indignation and gestured to the fuse box. "I have a situation here."

I tried to be helpful. "They've got little windows in them so you can see which one is blown." He lowered his head and squinted into the box.

"It is not that I do not trust your home-improvement skills, even though I know you do not have any." He carefully wiped the dust from the surface of the four fuses. "They are all black."

"Do you have any extras?"

"Of course not." He held up the roll of pennies that had been hidden in his front shirt pocket. "I have these." He smiled the coyote smile, the one that had made offensive linemen part their hair in the middle, NVA officers sweat between their shoulder blades, and otherwise intelligent women occupy bar stools in his immediate vicinity. Henry was the dog that wouldn't stay on the porch.

I watched with great apprehension as his fingers began twisting one of the rusted fuses from its corroded green outlet. The muscles on his forearm writhed like snakes rolling under sun-baked earth. To my knowledge, Henry had never lifted a weight in his life, but he still carried with him the tone of the warrior and was betrayed only by a very small amount of baggage at the middle. As the applied pressure began to take its toll, the glass knob turned and the remainder of the building went black. "Damn."

Hoots and laughter came from the darkness as we stood there trying to see each other. "I don't think that was it." I listened to him sigh and replace the fuse, and the lights from the beer coolers once again lit up the far room. There was a smattering of applause from the patrons.

"She did not say anything about calling you." He was still staring into the metal box, his odds having improved dramatically.

"So, what'd she have to say?"

"Nothing much. We talked about you."

"What about me?" Throughout the entire conversation, he studied the fuse box with the half-smile that told me he didn't take either the electrical crisis or my familial life all that seriously. Cady and Henry had a symbiotic, avuncular relationship that had led her into a quasi-bohemian lifestyle. She was professionally adept at billiards and darts, had majored in Native American Studies at Berkeley, his almost alma mater, had continued on to law school at the University of Washington, and was now an attorney in Philadelphia. When together, they spent the majority of their time whispering to each other, pointing toward me, and giggling. The thought of the two of them conspiring at long distance was

enough to worry me but, with Ruby's involvement, something was definitely up.

Deciding on the fuse diagonally opposite the first, Henry reached in and boldly twisted. The red neon horses that had stampeded across the parked vehicles outside flickered off to more cheers from the peanut gallery. From his lack of response, I wasn't sure if Henry had noticed.

"The pony . . ."

"Damn."

He screwed the fuse back in. The neon roan paused and then leapt across the hood of the Bullet. The flurries were letting up; the bad weather had decided to whistle on down the Bozeman trail to the rail-heads. The bar held a kind of conspiratorial coziness what with the subdued light of the beer coolers filtering through the cracks in the dividing wall. The soft murmur of small talk provided a buffer against the landscape that was now scrubbed with snowflakes.

"So, what about me?"

He tapped one of the remaining fuses accusingly with an index finger. "She is worried that you are still depressed."

"About what?" He looked at me, decided better of it, and looked back at the fuse box. I pushed off the wall and stepped carefully over the nail-laden boards that covered the floor. "I need another beer."

"You know where they are." I started to turn, but he caught me by tapping on one of the last two fuses. "The suspense is killing you, right?" I made a quick face, placed the empty beer bottle on the edge of the pool table, and bent over to pick up one of the boards. I spread my feet in a good, open stance and held the bark-covered board on my shoulder with both hands. This got a look. "You are going to knock me loose from this if I get electrocuted?"

I shrugged. "It's what friends are for. Besides, I want to see if anybody in this county has worse luck than me."

"Not yet." He twisted the next to last fuse and, to our amazement, absolutely nothing happened. We both looked for any absence of light, strained to listen for any lack of humming from the assorted coolers, heaters, and fans. Henry looked to the ceiling in deep concentration.

"Well, at least I didn't have to hit you with the board."

"Yes, but now we have to do the penny part." He nudged one of the coins from the paper roll and held it up for me to view.

"Where do you get this 'we' shit, Kemosabe?"

"Have you not ever done this before?"

I lowered my board, careful to avoid the nails. "No." We had reached the conceptual stage of the project, so Henry joined me in leaning against the pool table. "Have you?" He crossed his arms and considered the single lowest common denominator of legal tender.

"No, but I have heard that you can."

"From who?"

"Old people like you."

"I'm less than a year older than you."

He shrugged and read the inscription, "IN GOD WE TRUST. I was going to use a buffalo-head nickel, but it has to be copper to conduct, that much I know."

I dropped my board with a clatter. "Well, all I know about this stuff is enough to be scared shitless of it. Is there any reason why this has to be done tonight?" He made a face. "I mean your beer coolers are running, the heat's on, even the horse out front is working . . ."

"Pony."

"Whatever."

He sighed and looked around the bar. "Only if somebody wants to play pool."

I nudged him with my shoulder. "Is your life worth a game of pool?" He thought for a moment.

"Seems like it has been." He placed the penny on his cocked thumbnail. "Heads we go for it, tails we go sit in the dark with everybody else." I nodded, and he flipped the coin to me, whereupon I promptly dropped it in the pile of boards. We looked at each other.

"I didn't know I was supposed to catch it." He peeled another penny from the paper roll.

"Do not worry, I have got forty-nine more. You ought to be able to catch one of them." He flipped the second penny, and I snatched it from midair and slapped it on the back of my other hand. I left my palm covering the penny for a few moments, building my own little tension.

"Is the suspense killing you?"

"Not really, next we flip to see who puts the penny in the fuse." I uncovered the coin and thanked the God we trust it was tails.

"C'mon, I'll buy you a Coke."

* * *

I ambled along behind Henry as we joined the others at the bar itself. The walls were covered with the works of different artists who had received residencies with the Foundation. It was a mixed lot, but each piece reminded me of the individual who had occupied the adjacent barstool, and artists are always good for conversation, so long as you want to talk about their art.

The small group was clustered in the bar's corner, only slightly illuminated by the dim glow of available light. There were a couple of stray hunters, still dressed in their camouflage and optical-orange vests;

evidently the deer were wearing blue this year. I could make out Buck Morris, one of the local cowboys who took care of the Foundation's nominal cattle herd. He was easy to spot because of his hat; a weather-worn Resistol that some oil executive had offered to buy for \$250. General opinion was that Buck had missed the boat. The young man next to him wore a frayed jean jacket and had strong Cheyenne features. He must've been from out of county, because I didn't know him.

Next was Roger Russell, an electrician out of Powder Junction in the southern part of the county who had come up here to expand his business. Turk said that he was kind of the black sheep of the family and that he had little bastards scattered all up and down the Basin: "Powder River, let'r buck, a mile wide and an inch deep." I wondered mildly why Henry and I had just been gambling with our lives while an expert nursed a C and C in the next room.

Sitting next to him was probably the reason why Roger happened to be here. Vonnie Hayes was old school Wyoming; her grandfather had had a spread of thirty thousand acres of good land. Vonnie and I had kind of known each other when we were children but, after her father had committed suicide, she was sent to boarding school and her art life had taken her east for a number of years, where she had become an accomplished sculptress. Much later, she returned to take care of her aging mother. Vonnie and Martha had worked together on the library board and a number of other community projects in the county, and my daughter had worked for Vonnie as a housekeeper one summer. After Martha died, Cady tried to fix us up, an endeavor that Vonnie and I both viewed with equal parts humor and open-handed flirtation. Even in the dim light I could make out Vonnie's features, strong, with a lupine slant to the eyes, sandy hair pulled back in a casual bun.

I leaned against the bar beside her, bumping into Roger and giving him my substantial rear. "Jeez, Rog." I looked around in the darkness. "Don't you know we've got an electrical emergency on our hands here?"

He carefully placed his drink back and nudged it with his fingers. "I am . . . retired."

Henry appeared on the other side of the bar, slid a Rainier to me, and leaned into Roger. "What about this penny thing?"

Roger looked at him, attempting to gather himself for an answer. As he did, I looked over to Vonnie. "Boy, the things you find in the dark."

She took a sip of her chenin blanc. Henry kept a special bottle of the white wine in the cooler for her. I had always wanted to ask her for a sip but had never gotten up the nerve. Her eyes glowed softly, and the corner of her lips curved into a warm, sad smile. "Hello, Walter."

Undaunted by conversing with drunks, Henry continued. "Those old fuses, the big ones, you put pennies in them to get them to work?"

Roger laughed. "Yes you can, and you can also fuse every bit of the substandard wiring in this shit-hole and burn us all up alive." I kind of leaned Roger against the bar, stabilizing the listing that had begun as he spoke, and pulled a loose stool from the far side, placing it and myself, between Roger and Vonnie.

"Vonnie . . ." Her eyes had a way of opening a little wider when you spoke to her, then closing a little like they were capturing what you were saying and holding on to it. I was starting to remember why I had had a crush on her and continued. "You see this heathen, devil red man across the bar here?" Her eyes glanced at Henry for a moment, then returned to mine. "He and Cady are plotting some sort of intrigue against me."

Her eyes widened again, and she returned her gaze to Henry. "Is that true, Bear?" It irritated me that every woman I knew was on a cuddly first-name basis with the man.

Henry nodded toward me. "White man full of shit."

We were on a Technicolor roll now. I was Randolph Scott to his . . . I don't know, one of those bigger than life Indians that either got beat up or killed by the end of the third reel. "It's true, he's government trained to be involved in these kinds of covert operations." I pointed to the framed boxes on the wall behind the bar that contained a burnt map of North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. On this map were Henry's Special Forces pin, Purple Heart, Army Distinguished Service Cross, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and assorted campaign medals. There were also black-and-white photographs of Henry with his infantry platoon leaders, and one with his friend and team member Lo Chi, whom he had brought back and relocated in Los Angeles. There was even a picture of Henry and me, wearing the two ugliest Hawaiian shirts in Saigon, on a three-day leave in 1968. "You see all that stuff on the wall? He was trained in the war to be the gravest irritation to all those around him. There is no way a common soldier, such as myself, could possibly compete with a hand-picked, combat-hardened pain in the ass like him." Few people knew the shadowy history of the Special Operations Group that had operated out of Laos, but the numbers said it all: For every American Special Forces soldier that was lost, the North Vietnamese lost between 100 and 150 troops. The Bear had been a part of one of the most effective killing machines on either side of the war.

Henry's face pushed up and curved to the side as the weight of his head held steady in the palm of his supporting hand. "Common soldier? The closest he came to any real fighting was when he agreed to meet me for a three-day in Saigon." Under his breath he continued, but I'm pretty sure I was the only one that heard it, "Except for Tet . . ."

I left Henry to leverage Roger into doing some free electrical consulting work and turned my attention back to Vonnie. She was staring

into the glass eyes of one of the mounted antelope behind the bar. "Pretty animals." Her eyes remained steady on the pronghorn. "Do you think they feel pain like we do?"

"Nope."

She turned to look at me, seemingly irritated. "Really?"

"Really."

She stayed with me for a second, and then, fading into disappointment, glanced at her wine glass. "So, you don't think they feel pain."

"No, I said I don't think they feel pain like us."

"Oh." The smile slowly returned. "For a minute there I thought you had become a jerk."

"No, a blacksmith's son."

She continued to smile and then nodded. "You used to come out to our place with your father . . . Lloyd."

I watched her. "Nobody remembers his name."

"I think my mother had a little crush on him."

"Just another Longmire, plying his wiles. When I was real little, I used to make the shoeing rounds with him. It looked painful to me, so I asked him."

"What did he say?"

"Pop used to speak in biblical terms, but what he said was that the brutes of the field don't feel pain like humans. That that's the price we pay for thinking."

She took another sip of her wine. "Comforting to know that we're the species that feels the most pain."

I half-closed an eye and looked at her for a second. "Is that East Coast sarcasm I'm hearing?"

"No, that's East Coast self-pity."

"Oh." I was getting in way over my head. I can do the bull about as well as it can be done, but that edgy buzz-talk makes me weary in a heartbeat. I try and keep up, but after a while I start to drag.

She placed a hand on mine, and I think it was the hottest hand I had ever felt. "Walter, are you all right?"

It always started like this, a touch and a kind word. I used to feel heat behind my eyes and a shortness of breath, but now I just feel the emptiness. The fuses of desire are blown black windows, and I'm gone with no pennies to save me. "Oh, you mean you really want to talk?"

Her eyes were so sad, so honest. "Yeah, I figured since we didn't have anything else to do."

So I leaned in and told her the truth. "I just . . . I'm just numb most of the time."

She blinked. "Me too."

I felt like one of those guys in the movies, there in the foxhole asking how much ammo your buddy's got. I got two more clips, how 'bout you? "I know the things I'm supposed to do, but I just don't seem to have the energy. I mean, I've been thinking about turning over my pillow for three weeks."

"I know . . ." She looked away. "How's Cady?"

Here I was floating in the white-capped Pacific of self-pity, and Vonnie threw me a lifeline to keep me from embarrassing myself. Three fingers, bartender . . . "She's great." I looked at Vonnie to see if she was really interested. She was. "She's doing so well in Philadelphia."

"She always has been special."

"Yes, she is." We sat there for a moment, allowing the crackle and roar of my parental self-satisfaction to fade into the soft glow of friendly conversation. Her hand was still on my arm when the phone rang.

"Looks like she's tracked you down." The hand went away.

I watched as Henry allowed it to ring the second time, his tele-signature, then snatched it from the cradle. "It is another beautiful evening here at the Red Pony bar and continual soiree, how can I help you?" His face pulled up on one side as if the receiver had just smacked him. "Yes, he is here." He stretched the cord across the expanse of the bar and handed me the phone. His eyes stayed on mine.

I nudged it between my chin and shoulder with one hand, took a sip of beer with the other, and swallowed. "Hello, Sugar Blossom . . ."

"Hello, shithead," the voice on the other end said. "It's not a dead sheep."

I stood there, letting the world shift at quarter points and then got a bearing and dropped my voice. "What've we got?" Every eye in the bar was on me.

Vic's voice held an edge that I had never heard before, approaching an excitement under the grave suppression of businesslike boredom. "Male, Caucasian, approximately twenty-one years of age . . . one entry wound characteristic of, maybe, a .30-06."

I started to rub my eyes, noticed that my hand was shaking, and put it in my pocket. "All right . . . call the Store and tell them to send the Little Lady."

There was a brief pause, and I listened to the static from a radio on 137 patched through to a landline in Durant. "You don't want any Cashiers?"

"No, just the Bag Boys. I've got a highly dependable staff."

She laughed. "Wait till you get out here. These fucking sheep have been marching around on everything; I think the little bastards actually ate some of his clothes. And they shit on him."

"Great . . . Past the Hudson Bridge; you got your lights on?"

“Yep.” She paused for a moment, and I listened to the static. “Walt?”
I had started to hang up the phone. “Yeah?”
“You better bring some beer to quiet Bob and Billy down.”
This was a first. “You bet.” I started to hang up again.
“Walt?”
“Yep?”
“It’s Cody Pritchard.”

* * *

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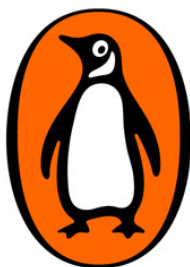
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